

## Introduction

### Preliminaries

As its title suggests, this book is an introduction to Indian philosophy (or more specifically, classical Indian philosophy) – one of the world’s great philosophical traditions. But while it aims to be an introduction to classical Indian philosophy suitable for the philosophically curious, it does not aim to be an introduction to philosophy. Instead the expected typical audience will include undergraduates who have taken at least a first course in philosophy, graduate students in philosophy seeking to broaden their philosophical horizons, and interested general readers with some prior background in philosophy.

In philosophy there are two common ways of structuring an introductory work. One approach is to structure the exposition chronologically; the other approach is to structure it thematically. This book strongly favours the thematic approach: each of the seven succeeding chapters is devoted to a particular philosophical topic discussed extensively by the classical Indian philosophers.

Chapter 1 ‘Value’ deals with Indian views about ethics, about which there were both major commonalities and some significant differences. Chapter 2 ‘Knowledge’ deals with some of the epistemological concerns central to classical Indian philosophy. Chapter 3 ‘Reasoning’ focuses on Indian ‘logic’, broadly conceived. Chapter 4 ‘Word’ deals with Indian philosophy of language. Chapter 5 ‘World’ focuses on metaphysics: specifically, the matter of which fundamental entities make up the world and how causation holds them together. Chapter 6 ‘Self’ deals with Indian theories of the self. Chapter 7 ‘Ultimates’ deals with philosophy of religion, especially the variety of differing conceptions of a maximally great being to be found in the Indian tradition.

This thematic organization permits the book to be used in at least two different ways. A reader wanting a moderately comprehensive overview of

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Indian philosophy should definitely read it straight through. But a reader wanting instead only a sense of Indian contributions to a particular philosophical theme – say, the nature of knowledge, or the metaphysics of the self – can just turn to the relevant chapter (and then follow this up with the suggested readings at the end of it).

Similarly, this whole book – appropriately supplemented with translations from the Sanskrit primary sources – could be used as the text for an introductory survey course on Indian philosophy; or particular chapters (plus readings) could be used either for more advanced courses on selected topics in Indian philosophy, or to provide a non-Western perspective in a general introductory course on, say, epistemology or philosophy of language.

Each chapter spends some time teasing out the presuppositions and arguments of the Indian philosophers. Hence, unlike some introductions to Indian philosophy, sustained attention is paid here to various of the technical details of the Indian debates in order to enable us better to pursue the paradigmatically philosophical tasks of evaluating proposed analyses and justifications of beliefs. While both Indian and Western philosophers are certainly concerned to offer some sort of synoptic account of reality, the route to that end is usually strongly connected with the rigorous tasks of analysis and argumentation. This is why so much of this book is devoted to Indian materials drawn from the classical and medieval periods, periods of outstanding philosophical creativity and rigour in India.

Before plunging into the details of the competing theories and arguments to be canvassed, however, it will also be helpful for the reader to have at least some prior sense of the general historical context of these Indian debates and the chronology of the Indian authors mentioned. Accordingly, I shall presently offer a brief historical overview of Indian philosophy. But before I do so it seems appropriate to raise first a metaphilosophical question that this book might otherwise seem naively to presuppose an affirmative answer to: namely, ‘Is there Indian *philosophy*?’

### **Is there Indian *philosophy*?**

Indologists are often understandably exasperated by the question ‘Is there Indian *philosophy*?’ when they encounter it being asked in a snide tone conveying that the questioner is already convinced – typically from a position of textual ignorance – that the correct answer is a negative one. After all, so far

as most Indologists are concerned, the obviously correct answer is an affirmative one! But the question can also be raised quite sincerely as a genuine metaphilosophical question.

Metaphilosophy is that branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of philosophy and hence questions like: What is philosophy? What is philosophy for? How should philosophy be done? From a metaphilosophical perspective, then, the question ‘Is there Indian *philosophy*?’ can be more charitably construed as raising genuine issues of clarification about what is to count as philosophy.

We need to begin by distinguishing two senses of ‘philosophy’. One is a familiar non-technical sense of that term: roughly, a complete world-view that could be regarded as providing a fully coherent explanation of everything. Uncontroversially, there is Indian philosophy in this non-technical sense of ‘philosophy’. But there is also a second, more technical sense of ‘philosophy’. Philosophy in this latter sense occurs when we begin to reflect critically on the traditional explanatory world-view: when, for instance, we begin to ask questions about precisely what is explained, how the proffered explanation works, and whether it is superior to rival explanatory candidates. The development of Western philosophy is associated with the growth of such a tradition of critical reflection. And, as we shall see, the Indian tradition too developed a comparable critical tradition.

The second point to make is that the question ‘Is there Indian *philosophy*?’ is ambiguous because the term ‘philosophy’ may be being used descriptively or evaluatively. Compare the question ‘What is art?’ When someone says of something, ‘That is not art’, they may be saying (*descriptively*) that it is not a member of the class of artworks, or they may be saying (*evaluatively*) that while it may be a member of the class of artworks, it is not a member of the class of *good* artworks. After all, something can be art without being good art. Similarly, to say something is not philosophy may be a descriptive claim or an evaluative one, for something can be philosophy without being *good* philosophy. But determining the descriptive range of the term is, in an important fashion, logically prior to determining its evaluative range: although something can be philosophy without being *good* philosophy, nothing can be *good* philosophy without being philosophy.

Matters would obviously be simpler if we could all agree on a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for something’s being (descriptively) philosophy, in the technical sense of that term. But, alas, no such consensus obtains

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among philosophers – Western or Indian. Some have felt, however, that at least we can specify some plausible *necessary* conditions, conditions that would exclude Indian thought from being *philosophy*.

The difficulty for such a project, however, is to specify plausible necessary conditions on philosophy such that they are satisfied by Western philosophy, but not Indian philosophy. For example, it is sometimes complained that the Indian thinkers were motivated by religious concerns, and hence were not really philosophers. Call this *the secularity condition* on philosophy. But such a condition is clearly unsatisfactory, for while it is true that many Indian philosophers were motivated by religious concerns, so too were many Western philosophers. A purportedly *descriptive* account of philosophy that excludes the work of (among others) Descartes, Leibniz, Berkeley, Kant and almost all of the Western medievals is plainly inadequate.

A much more plausible condition on being philosophy is *the argumentation condition*: philosophy is concerned with analyzing and evaluating arguments for and against competing positions. This requirement flows directly from the point made earlier that the occurrence of philosophy (in the technical sense of the term) is associated with the growth of a tradition of critical reflection. And it is easy to see how a Western philosopher, turning from the works of Kant or Russell to dip into translations of the Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavadgītā* or the *Dhammapada*, might be inclined to deny that these Indian texts are genuine works of *philosophy* – whatever their other merits as ‘wisdom literature’.

But the argumentation condition needs to be wielded delicately. On the one hand, philosophical arguments can be presented more or less explicitly or formally, and even Western philosophers have made use of a variety of literary styles and genres to present their views, including myths, dramatic dialogues and epigrams. An overly austere conception of argumentation risks giving us a purportedly descriptive account of philosophy that banishes works of, inter alia, the pre-Socratics, Plato and Nietzsche from the shelves of philosophy. On the other hand, if we are willing to tough it out and insist on construing the argumentation condition so austere, then it is still the case that huge amounts of Indian *śāstra* literature from the classical and medieval periods, packed with explicit technical argumentation, will satisfy the condition. And these are exactly the kind of Indian philosophical texts we shall be particularly attending to in the succeeding chapters of this book.

A third proposed condition on philosophy is *the historicist condition*. In 2001 the French philosopher Jacques Derrida visited Shanghai, causing much consternation in China when he was reported as having said:

There is no problem with talking about Chinese thought, Chinese history, Chinese science, and so forth, but obviously, I have a problem with talking about the Chinese ‘philosophy’ of this Chinese thought and culture before the introduction of the European model . . . Philosophy in essence is not just thought. It is linked with a sort of specific history, with one type of language, and with an ancient Greek invention. It is an ancient Greek invention which then underwent ‘transformation’ by Latin translation and German translation and so on. It is something European. There may be various kinds of thought and knowledge of equal integrity beyond Western European culture, but it is not reasonable to call them ‘philosophy’. (Jing 2006: 60–1)

A similar argument would, of course, rule out the existence of Indian *philosophy* too.

Once again, however, the proposed necessary condition seems implausibly restrictive for a *descriptive* account of philosophy. No musicologist wants to insist that there is no Indian *music* because the concept of music is linked with a specific (European) history and (European) type of language. So what is so special about philosophy that it is supposed to be so very different?

Finally, we have the *lexical equivalence condition*, which effectively claims that since there is no single traditional Indian word for ‘philosophy’, there was no philosophy in India. True, there are two Sanskrit words that might seem promising candidates for terminological analogues of ‘philosophy’: namely, *darśana* and *ānvīkṣikī* (see further Halbfass 1988). But although *darśana* (‘view’) is used in the Indian doxographic tradition to name philosophical ‘schools’, the Sanskrit term has no serious methodological implications. In contrast, while the term *ānvīkṣikī* (‘investigation through reasoning’) does have methodological implications, it is too narrowly focused to serve as an equivalent to ‘philosophy’.

Why assume, however, that philosophy cannot occur in a culture without a clearly corresponding (single) term also occurring in that culture? After all, in the West earlier practices came to be retrospectively interpreted, redescribed and appropriated as ‘philosophy’. Why can we not do the same with the Indian practices we now call ‘Indian philosophy’?

In sum, then, the secularity condition, the historicist condition, and the lexical equivalence condition all seem implausible candidates for being a necessary condition for philosophy. The argumentation condition is a much more plausible candidate, if construed generously enough, but then the standard works of Indian philosophy would also satisfy that condition. True, a more austere construal of the argumentation condition might disqualify some of these

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Indian texts from being counted as philosophy, but there would still remain a very large number of Indian texts that would satisfy even such a strengthened condition. Moreover, the strengthened argumentation condition would also risk excluding a significant amount of what would be generally accepted as Western philosophy.

Of course, defusing some sceptical arguments about the existence of Indian philosophy is not the same as offering a positive argument for the existence of Indian philosophy. One promising positive strategy for locating Indian philosophy as *philosophy* is to proceed recursively: that is, begin with some paradigms of philosophy, then count anything as philosophy that resembles these paradigms (at least as closely as they resemble each other).

For the sake of the argument, let us allow the sceptic about Indian philosophy to choose the standard works and figures of Western philosophy (from the pre-Socratics onwards) as the paradigms of philosophy. This enables us to construct a resemblance class of philosophical paradigms such that members of the relevant resemblance class are all more similar to one another than they all are to any one thing outside the class (i.e. each non-member of the class differs more from some member than that member differs from any member). Faced with a new candidate for inclusion as philosophy, we ask whether it differs more from some member of the class of paradigms than that member differs from any member of the class. If the answer is negative, then it can be added to the class of paradigms.

This recursive strategy also recognizes the historicity of the notion it seeks to capture, for the construction of a resemblance class takes place over time and often involves the use of different paradigms, which is why the notion of philosophy can seem to involve a class that lacks unity. But this alleged lack of unity of the relevant class of paradigm objects may be a misperception caused by the multiplicity of paradigms around which the notion has been constructed over time. Accordingly, some things within the resemblance class cluster together more closely than others, even though all members of the class are sufficiently similar to count as members of the similarity circle we call 'philosophy'.

The term 'philosophy' does not need, then, to refer to an unchanging, ahistorical essence in order to be intelligible, and the obvious dissimilarities between some of the things that can be claimed as instances of philosophy should not be allowed to obscure the existence of a network of relevant similarities that unify the resemblance class. It is the presence

of these very similarities that justifies the inclusion of Indian philosophy into the resemblance class; that is, justifies acknowledging Indian philosophy as *philosophy*.

### **Indian philosophy: a brief historical overview**

The study of the history of Indian philosophy is notoriously fraught with problems in establishing chronology and dates. Hence for many of even the major figures of Indian philosophy it is very difficult to give any precise details of their lives (this is why in this book only an assignment of an author to a particular century is attempted). True, there is more of a consensus among scholars about *relative* chronology, but even this is a very much more disputed matter than it is in the case of Western philosophy.

Furthermore, among Indologists the periodization of Indian philosophy is another highly contested matter (see Franco 2013). All historical periodization, however, involves a certain amount of arbitrariness, so perhaps the following may serve as a useful first pass for our purposes:

- 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)

Some authors treat the third period here as more seamlessly continuous with the classical period, so that the term ‘classical Indian philosophy’ then refers to work of both the second and third periods above. Unless otherwise indicated, we too shall follow this practice of using ‘classical Indian philosophy’ to refer indiscriminately to Indian philosophy of what is, according to the periodization above, either the classical or medieval periods.

The ancient period of Indian philosophy is the period of the composition of Vedas and the Upaniṣads. It is also the period of the growth of the anti-Vedic movements: Buddhism, Jainism and Cārvāka. The classical period of Indian philosophy is the period of the rise of the philosophical systems (*darśanas*). The medieval period is the period of the great commentaries on the *sūtras* of these various systems. And the modern period is the period characterized by the contact of inheritors of the earlier tradition with new influences, particularly from the West. While the primary focus in succeeding chapters of this book is on texts from the classical and medieval periods of Indian philosophy,

a few words more about all four periods may be helpful to the reader in contextualizing what is to follow.

### The ancient period of Indian philosophy

The earliest Indian religious texts are the Vedas. These include hymns to the gods and manuals of sacrificial ritual, but also the beginnings of Indian philosophy proper. Thus we find in the early Vedic texts speculations about the origins of existence and prefigurements of important later concepts like karma and moral order (*ṛta*). More importantly still, among the late Vedic texts are the Upaniṣads, a set of dialogues on philosophical themes.

The main philosophical themes that the Upaniṣads explore are the nature of the Absolute (*Brahman*) as the ground of being and the importance of knowledge of *Brahman* as the key to liberation. Crucial for the attainment of this goal is a correct understanding of the nature of the Self (*ātman*), which according to some texts is identical to *Brahman*. This Upaniṣadic emphasis on the importance of a correct understanding of the nature of the self for the attainment of liberation meant that metaphysical and epistemological issues about knowledge and the self became fundamental for many later Indian philosophers.

The Upaniṣads thus represent a shift in world-view away from the earlier Vedic literature's emphasis on ritual action towards a focus on self-realization and the attainment of liberation from suffering and rebirth. Correspondingly, we find two competing ethical ideals in the Vedic literature: an earlier ideal of the householder embedded in society and committed to the performance of social duties (*dharma*), and a later ideal of the renunciant who has withdrawn from the world to pursue liberation (*mokṣa*).

The Vedic legacy in later Indian philosophy, then, is a continuing tension between two competing strands in Brahmanical (or 'Hindu') thought: activism (*pravṛtti*), exemplified in the early Vedic ritualistic tradition, and quietism (*nivṛtti*), exemplified in the later Upaniṣadic renunciant tradition. One popular attempt to resolve this tension is to be found in the *Bhagavadgītā* (c. 500 BCE), part of the great *Mahābhārata* epic.

The Upaniṣads are sometimes represented as the quintessence of Indian philosophy. This is unfortunate for at least two reasons. First, although these texts are philosophically suggestive, they are nowhere near as systematic or rigorously argumentative as classical Indian philosophical works from, say,



the fifth century onwards. Indeed, given a more austere conception of what *philosophy* is, the Upaniṣads are probably better represented as Indian *proto-philosophy*. They do, however, significantly contribute to the development of later Indian philosophy, particularly shaping the schools of Vedānta.

The second reason why it is important not to identify the Upaniṣads with Indian philosophy is that even in the ancient period there were rival anti-Vedic philosophies being vigorously championed by (among others) the Buddhists, the Jainas and the Cārvākas. Most of these philosophies are associated with the influence of the *śramaṇa* or ascetic movement. Vedic orthodoxy was built upon commitment to the authority of the Vedas, belief in a world creator, the path of ritualism, and a social structure based upon a hereditary hierarchy of caste. The diverse heterodox schools, collectively known as the *śramaṇas*, rejected all of these in favour of the path of asceticism.

The two most important heterodox schools were Buddhism and Jainism, both arising around the sixth century BCE. Buddhism's historical founder was the prince Gautama Siddhārtha (known after his enlightenment as Gautama Buddha), and the path to freedom from suffering that he preached was called the 'middle way' between the extremes of sensuality and asceticism. While Gautama accepted his own versions of the Upaniṣadic doctrines of rebirth, karma and liberation, a crucial Buddhist theme was the rejection of the Upaniṣadic doctrine of *ātman* or the Self. Gautama also rejected the Brahmanical beliefs in a world creator and in caste as a principle of social order. He attracted many followers, both monastics and laypersons, during his lifetime and established a large Buddhist community in India that flourished there for around seventeen centuries, during which time it successfully spread Buddhist teachings throughout Asia.

Jainism's historical founder was Mahāvīra, and (like Gautama) he was not born of the priestly brahmin class, but of the *kṣatriya* or warrior class. Like Gautama, Mahāvīra too was unimpressed by Brahmanical commitments to sacrificial rituals, a world creator and a social order based on caste. Before he was 30 years old he had renounced the householder life and become a mendicant, leading a life of severe austerities before achieving enlightenment and being recognized by his followers as a *tīrthāṅkara* or 'ford crosser', and establishing a large Jaina community of both monastics and laypersons. Although Jainism was never as popular as Buddhism in India, it has continued to flourish there right up to the present day. It has also counted among its adherents some of the sharpest philosophical minds in classical Indian philosophy.

While both Buddhism and Jainism rejected many tenets central to Brahmanism, they were nevertheless both still committed to the pursuit of liberation (*mokṣa*). The Cārvāka materialists, in contrast, were anti-Vedic atheists who rejected the goal of liberation and all of the ascetic practices said to be required to achieve it. Their original texts did not survive, but through quotations in the writings of the opponents they enjoyed a polemical longevity.

### The classical period of Indian philosophy

The classical period of Indian philosophy is the period of the rise of the philosophical schools or *darśanas*. Some of these were Brahmanical schools that accepted the authority of the Vedas and hence were classified as orthodox (*āstika*). Others (like the Buddhists, the Jainas and the Cārvākas) did not accept the authority of the Vedas and were classified as heterodox (*nāstika*). In both cases the characteristic textual genre adopted by a *darśana* is the *sūtra*, a systematic arrangement of memorizable aphorisms organized systematically around reasons and arguments so as to present a world-view. This basic framework subsequently requires the development of a second genre, the *bhāṣya* or more extended commentary on the gnomic original *sūtra*.

According to a later Indian doxographical tradition, the orthodox Hindu philosophical schools are six in number, arranged in three pairs: Sāṃkhya–Yoga, Nyāya–Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsā–Vedānta. (This schema is inadequate historically, but still useful for our present purposes.)

Sāṃkhya is the oldest of these six schools, but its classical redaction is to be found in Īśvarakṛṣṇa's *Sāṃkhyakārikā* (second century). It teaches a dualistic metaphysics that is usually taken to underpin the practical psychology of Yoga, as presented in Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* (third century).

Nyāya is the school of logic and argument and Vaiśeṣika is the atomistic tradition. Their root *sūtras* are, respectively, Gautama's *Nyāyasūtra* (second century) and Kaṇāda's *Vaiśeṣikasūtra* (second century). Although Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika were originally two separate schools with separate *sūtras*, they soon come to be regarded as a single syncretic school (Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika) specializing in logic, epistemology and metaphysics.

Mīmāṃsā is the school of scriptural exegesis, focusing on the earlier Vedic texts, and its root *sūtra* is Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* (first century). Vedānta, in contrast, focuses on the later Upaniṣadic texts and its root *sūtra* is Bādarāyaṇa's *Brahmasūtra* (second century BCE).