

Nontheistic Conceptions of the Divine

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The idea that there are nontheistic conceptions of the divine is at first sight a puzzling one. To call something 'divine' is, after all, just to call it God, or at least to place it in close proximity to God; the etymology of the word (Latin divus/deus; Sanskrit deva) shows this connection, too. And 'nontheistic' is derived from the Greek theos, which is just the word ordinarily translated into Latin as deus, both of which, in English, become 'God'. In the Nicene Creed, for example, recited in Christian churches all over the world every week, the English phrase 'we' (or 'I' -- the Greek and Latin versions differ on this) 'believe in one God' renders the Greek pisteuomen eis hena theon and the Latin credo in unum deum. To speak of nontheistic conceptions of the divine is therefore a bit like speaking of nonpolitical understandings of the state: if not quite an oxymoron at least a close approach to one.

Perhaps, however, we need not be hamstrung by etymology. In thinking about what a nontheistic conception of the divine might be, we can begin by stipulating that a theistic conception of the divine will be any understanding that takes God to be a person whose names include a good number of the following: creator, redeemer, sanctifier, lover, knower, holy one, powerful one, eternal one. Most such understandings will be Jewish, Christian, or Islamic: they will have been developed within the vast complex of thought and practice that takes itself to be identifying and thinking about the God who called Abraham to leave the land of his fathers for the promised land. But not all will. Some

Indian thinkers named God in some or all of these ways (Ramanuja, who flourished in the early 12th century, provides a classical example), and did so without knowledge of anything Jewish, Christian, or Islamic. For the most part, though, if we define theistic conceptions of the divine in this way they will be broadly Abrahamic.

On this understanding of theism, a conception of the divine is nontheistic precisely to the extent that it departs from this tradition of naming the divine. Such departure might be explicit and self-conscious: this would be so when a thinker reacts against theistic naming and tries to do better by replacing it with something different. But it might also occur as part of a tradition to which theistic naming is largely or entirely unknown. This way of approaching the question does not yield a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the discrimination of theistic from nontheistic conceptions of the divine; but it does provide a point of entry and a rough-and-ready means for such discrimination, and this will suffice for the purposes of this essay.

Nontheistic conceptions of the divine could be classified and discussed in many ways. One approach would be to construct a typology of possible nontheistic understandings, but this would be tedious and not terribly useful. A second approach -- the one to be followed here -- would collect some representative instances of nontheistic understandings of the divine, and would comment on the concepts and argumentative strategies that inform them. Since most theistic understandings of the divine will be related in one way or another to Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, it will be easiest and most useful for purposes of contrast to take the examples from traditions of thought and practice largely or completely uninfluenced by the concepts familiar to these Abrahamic religions. This is what I shall do. The

Sanskrit religious and philosophical literature of India provides a vast and rich set of resources for studying conceptions of and arguments about the divine that are historically independent (for the most part) of those to be found in the Greek, Arabic, and Latin literature of the Mediterranean world. Naturally, no systematic survey of the understandings of the divine to be found in the Indian literature will be offered; and nothing at all will be said about the literature of China, Korea, Japan, and so forth. My goal is only to offer some examples that will illustrate the range of Indian thought about the divine (about what is taken to be maximally and finally significant), and to indicate the problems and trajectories of thought they suggest for philosophers of religion.

It is important to note that philosophy of religion as understood in this volume is a largely Christian enterprise. Its problems, concepts, and methods are products of peculiarly Christian commitments and a specifically Christian history, and its agenda is driven by these commitments and this history even when those doing work in the field are not themselves Christian or are opposed to Christianity. This goes far to explain why resources that pose the question of how to understand what is maximally and finally significant from outside the Christian tradition have yet to find a significant place in philosophy of religion. Such resources are increasingly being made available in English (I mention some of them in the bibliography attached to this essay), and there are some signs that these resources are beginning to be paid more attention by philosophers of religion; it is to be expected that this will increasingly be so as the discipline matures. The Christian nature of philosophy of religion explains, too, the approach of this essay (and of the volume): Christian concepts and methods provide the norm against which alien concepts and methods are

measured. This could be different: if Buddhist or Vedantin concepts and methods were the yardstick, and Christian ones measured by them, we would have essays on such topics as non-Buddhist conceptions of the divine, and on the relation between compassion and emptiness. This is only to note what is inevitable: that the philosophy of religion is shaped by its history and should make no pretense at transcending or escaping it.

The Divine Text

Some Indian thinkers, especially those connected with what has come to be called the Mimamsa school (the term means, literally, intense thought or investigation), took the Veda, a Sanskrit text, to be maximally, finally, and unsurpassably significant -- to be, that is, divine. This, at first blush, is clearly a nontheistic conception of the divine, and one that cries out for elucidation.

More precisely and fully: some Indian thinkers came to understand a particular set of Sanskrit vocables as eternal and authorless, and as a sustaining feature of the universe, a feature without which an ordered universe could not continue to exist and without which coherent human thought could not occur. These vocables, moreover, contain a set of injunctions to action -- typically, but not only, to sacrificial action -- whose proper performance is essential to the maintenance of the order of the universe. And, finally, the vocables in question are not written objects, not graphs on paper or palm-leaf. They are, rather, vibrations in the air; their written representations are helps to the memory, aids to the possibility of vocalization, but are not themselves the sacred sounds.

Such a view raises a number of questions. Among the more important (and certainly the more widely discussed by the adherents and opponents of this view in India) of these are the following. First, there is the question of the extent and accessibility of the text in question: what are its boundaries and how may it be heard, chanted, or, less desirably, read? Second, there is the question of interpretation of the Sanskrit sentences that make up the text: if these sentences command actions upon whose proper performance the order of the universe depends, it will be important to know what those commands are, which means that it will be important to be able to interpret the sentences that contain them. Third, there is the very idea of an eternal and authorless text in what appears to be a natural language: does such an idea make sense, and if it does, what kind of sense does it make? Fourth, even if the idea does make some sense, is there any reason to think it true?

The Veda's proper boundary is a matter of debate among those who take it to be eternal and uncreated. A minimalist understanding claims that the term 'Veda' denotes only the collections of hymns and songs called Rgveda. This corpus runs to a thousand pages in printed editions, and consists mostly of hymns of praise to various gods and other non-human beings. But some think that the Veda also includes other material, including further collections of hymns, magical spells, (prose) instruction as to the proper performance and meaning of certain ritual actions, meditations on such things as the nature of the person, the events that befall us after death, and even discussions of such technical matters as grammar and etymology. Defining the Veda's limits is typically a polemical matter: including some matter excluded by others is usually itself an element in an argument about orthodoxy, orthopraxy, or both. But however the boundaries are drawn, defenders of

the Veda's eternity and authorlessness think of it as a collection of chants rather than as a written text, and therefore take access to it to be had by ear rather than by eye. This is why the Veda is called sruti, 'that which is heard.' The syllables in which it consists are memorized by certain members of the priestly (Brahminical) classes, and in order that they may be preserved without variation (as, for the most part, they seem to have been for considerably more than two thousand years), a complex system of checks and balances is built into the system of memorization. It is still possible to hear groups of small boys (always boys: memorizing the Veda is a male prerogative) in India being drilled in these methods of memorization and recitation.

Taking a text's vocables to be an eternal and authorless part of the order of things, and thinking also that the act of chanting them, as well as the performance of what they instruct, contributes to and is perhaps a necessary condition for the continuation of that order raises and presses the question of interpretation. Coming to understand what the words and sentences of such a text mean will be among the most important of tasks, and one to which a great deal of energy will naturally be devoted by those who hold the view. This was indeed the case among Mimamsakas (adherents of the Mimamsa) in India. They developed, it is not too much to say, an entire theory of language, meaning, and interpretation under the conceptual pressure of having to account for -- and to provide an account of -- the language of the Veda. It is not quite that a decision about the Veda's eternity and authorlessness came first and was then followed by a theory of language and meaning as dough rises after yeast has been added. It is rather that as each of the two central Mimamsa ideas -- the eternity and intrinsic authoritativeness of sound (sabdanityatva, sabdapramanya), on the one hand, and the authorlessness (apauruseyatva) of the Veda, on

the other -- gained precision and complexity, it demanded a corresponding development in the other so that each influenced the other by way of a feedback loop, or (to borrow a Christian metaphor) a circumincession. The result was a metaphysic and a semantics of great complexity of which only the barest sketch can be offered here. Concepts in the religious register often have this kind of fruitful focusing effect upon thought: just as the idea of God has focused the conceptual attention of Christians upon topics as diverse as the logic of possibility and necessity and the nature of free will, so the idea of the Veda concentrated the attention of Indian thinkers upon language, meaning, and the art of interpretation.

The term 'sound' (sabda) denotes, to a first approximation, meaning-bearing utterance. This is, for Kumarila, the greatest systematizer of Mimamsa thought (he probably flourished in the seventh century), intrinsically authoritative, which is to say naturally productive of knowledge on the part of those who hear and understand it. Meaning-bearing utterance, testimony as we might call it, stands in no need of appeal to any other belief-forming practice in order to have its own reliability as such justified or demonstrated. In this it is like sensory perception or reasoning: these too are understood to be practices whose reliability as producers of true beliefs in those who use them stands in no need of justification by appeal to practices outside themselves. Mimamsakas, like many other Indian thinkers who devoted themselves to this topic (an essentially epistemological one) were concerned about the paradoxes of infinite regress which they thought would rapidly and inevitably follow if intrinsic reliability or authoritativeness were not permitted to some belief-forming practices.

There are, no doubt, some difficulties here; but among them is not the obvious objection that this position means that sabda is always

and necessarily productive of true beliefs in those who hear it. This is of course not so, and the Mimamsakas acknowledged and thematized the fact by analyzing the faults to which testimony may be subject. These are many; but they are all related in one way or another to the use of testimony by fallible (usually human) agents. We may lie, misunderstand, be inattentive, and so forth; and when any of these lapses occurs, testimony fails, which is to say that meaning-bearing utterance does not produce true beliefs. The important point for considering the sabda in which the Veda consists, of course, is that its sounds have no human (or any other) agent involved in their creation, and are as a result necessarily free from all the errors to which testimony can be subject. The argument is simple: if testimony fails, this is only because of a failure in the agent; if there is no agential failure, then there is no testimonial failure. One important result of denying that the Veda is authored, then, is that it is thereby insulated from the possibility of failing as testimony. It becomes supremely and completely reliable -- indeed, error-free -- just because of its apauruseyatva, its property of not having been authored or in any other way produced by an agent. The Veda may, of course, fail to communicate truth or to command and bring about what ought to be done by being misunderstood. But this is an imperfection only in those who hear or read it, not an imperfection in the Veda itself.

This view of the Veda's infallibility and inerrancy may helpfully be contrasted with views about textual infallibility held by Jews (about the Tanakh), Christians (about the Bible), and Muslims (about the Quran). Christian views are the furthest from the Mimamsa on this matter. Even the strongest Christian views about the inerrancy of the biblical text do not attribute this inerrancy to any particular set of syllables (or vocables) in a natural language. Rather, they attribute

it to what the text says, to its semantic content. This is because Christians have always encouraged translation of the text, and have then treated the translated text as of equal authority with that from which the translation was made. It follows from this that the authority of the text does not reside in any particular set of Hebrew or Greek syllables, but rather in what these syllables are taken to mean. The authority of the Bible, too, is founded upon the fact that it is the word of God, which means that it has an agent as its author, something that from the Mimamsa point of view introduces the possibility of error. Jewish views of the authority of the Hebrew text of the Tanakh are closer to Mimamsa views of the text of the Veda, because for most Orthodox Jews (and for most of the rabbinic interpreters of that text), translations of the Hebrew do not have its authority: what counts precisely is the syllables of the Hebrew. This is also the case for Islamic views of the Arabic text of the Quran. But in both these cases the text has no significance independently of its author, who is God. The closest approach among the Abrahamic religions to a Mimamsa view of textual authority is probably to be found among Kabbalists, for some of whom the very Hebrew syllables of the Tanakh are part of the order of the universe, and may even be thought to be so independently of the fact that God spoke them.

Mimamsa thinkers were aware that some in India wished to ground the authority of the Veda upon its authorship by an omniscient being, which would be to make the Veda God's work, and thus to approach Jewish and Christian views. But they consistently and argumentatively rejected any such view. For them, the idea of an omniscient agent was incoherent, and in the arguments back and forth about this (mostly between them and the Buddhists, some of whom thought of the Buddha as omniscient), most of the difficulties familiar in Christian discussions

about the matter were raised. Mimamsakas did not think that any agent could have knowledge of the future, for example; and that even if, per impossibile, there were an omniscient agent, it would be impossible for a non-omniscient agent to know this fact. Objections were raised, that is, to both the possibility of omniscience, and to its knowability even if it were possible. More fundamentally, of course, Mimamsakas objected to the thought that the Veda might have an author because they took this to mean that it might be erroneous in some way -- recall the link between testimony's errors and authorship -- and also because they took the idea of authorship, whether by an omniscient or a non-omniscient agent, to imply that there was a time when the authored text did not yet exist. And such a claim about the Veda would call into question its beginningless (and endless) world-sustaining and world-creating functions. To say of a text that it is the word of God, then, is to say something much less significant than to say that it is eternal and authorless.

The divinity of the Veda is stated for Mimamsakas by way of the twin claims of its eternality and its authorlessness. These claims are intended to make the text of the Veda foundational for all attempts to arrive at truth, and thereby to give the task of interpreting that text unrestricted epistemic primacy. One interesting concomitant of this view is the idea that the word-meaning relation is non-conventional and non-historical. The relation between the Sanskrit word loka ('world'), for instance, and that to which it refers is itself a structural and necessary feature of the universe, a feature that could not have been otherwise. The vibrations produced when the two vocables that make up loka are uttered are related causally to the very existence of a world at least by being a sine qua non for such existence. Without the Sanskrit loka, no universe. I suspect that for most readers of this

essay, this is a deeply counter-intuitive view; it was not widely accepted in India, either, but for most contemporary speakers of English it probably seems obviously false. Surely, we may say, the fact that the word loka means 'world' is entirely contingent? Surely the kind of relation that loka bears to the world is the same kind of relation that 'world' bears to the world (or that 'monde' does)? And surely in each case the relation is entirely conventional, the result of a historical story that could have been different?

An important question for those who want to think about and defend the idea of an eternal, authorless text whose vocables order the universe is: what if these vocables are not sounded? Does the universe's order depend upon their vibration, and does this in turn mean that someone, somewhere, must always be chanting the text or in some other way causing it to be sounded if the universe is not to relapse into chaos? Some Mimamsakas held a view of this kind, and something like it informs the great importance given the training of skilled reciters of the Veda. But such a view clearly had -- and was perceived in India to have -- some significant problems. It is always possible that the seers who were the first to chant the Veda (though not of course its authors) might have no descendants, or that for other reasons Vedic chant might altogether cease.

So much, then, in brief for the idea of the Veda's divinity. Does it make sense? I think it does: it is not obviously incoherent, and while it raises some difficult questions for its defenders, the tradition is very much aware of these questions and objections, and has devoted significant energy to the attempt to meet them. Judging its success at this is a large topic, but it seems reasonable to say that Mimamsakas aren't obviously offending against any epistemic duties by continuing to believe and defend the views sketched here.

A distinct question is that of whether anyone who doesn't already think that the Veda is eternal and authorless should be persuaded by anything the Mimamsakas say about this to come to assent to these claims. The answer to this is no. I, for example, think that the Veda is neither eternal nor authorless; that the vocables of Sanskrit are not necessary features of the universe; and that there are no non-contingent relations between the words of natural languages and nonlinguistic items -- which is to say that I take all languages to be natural. But I do not think it obvious that these things are so, which is also to say that the Mimamsa view of the Veda's divinity merits attention, and is not easy decisively to refute. This is an ordinary feature of religious views (and indeed of most complex philosophical views), and it is one that Mimamsakas would, I think, be quite happy to have pointed out. Their central concern when arguing about their deeply textual understanding of divinity was not to convince others of its truth but rather to explicate it and to defend it against objections.

Among the advantages of considering the Mimamsa's deeply serious attempt to construe the divine textually is that it calls into question the natural tendency of philosophers of religion to think that when we speak of the divine -- that which is maximally and finally significant, that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought as Anselm of Canterbury put it in Europe at the end of the eleventh century -- we must be speaking of God. In suggesting that, and how, we might think of a text as that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought, the Mimamsakas do us the favor of suggesting some trajectories of thought in the philosophy of religion that do not belong to the discipline's traditional topics.

The most direct conceptual descendant in India of Mimamsa views about the Veda's eternality and authorlessness was that of Advaita Vedanta ('nondual culmination of the Veda'), perhaps the best-known

outside India among Indian philosophical schools. It, too, has a non-theistic understanding of the divine, and although the substance of this understanding is very different from the Mimamsa, the lineage is clear enough. Those who think of the Veda as divine are called followers of the purvamimamsa, the 'prior Mimamsa'; and those who think of the divine as nondual are called followers of the uttaramimamsa, the 'subsequent Mimamsa'. And there are also connections between the grammar of the thought of the two schools. As followers of the prior Mimamsa began to speculate in an abstract fashion about the nature of the sound, the sabda, that constitutes the text of the Veda, one of the names they gave it was Brahman; and further argument about the nature of this Brahman was one of the routes into an analysis of the divine as strictly nondual (advaita), a set of speculations that provides my second example of an Indian non-theistic conception of the divine.

The Nondual Divine

Sankara, with whom nondualism (advaita) is most closely associated, flourished most probably in the eighth century. He, like the followers of the prior Mimamsa, thought that philosophical thinking about what is maximally important should begin with sustained exegetical attention to the text of the Veda, and most especially to that of the Upanisads, a set of speculative works in verse and prose whose composition may have begun as early as 1000 B.C., and which are taken by some to be part of the Veda. The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, among the earliest of these works, begins with the pregnant line, "Dawn is the head of the sacrificial horse," a line that shows in summary form the interest of the Upanisads in connecting speculation about the

nature and significance of the sacrifice with speculation about the nature of the cosmos. This connection is also one of the threads that connects the prior to the subsequent Mimamsa.

But Sankara did not share with his Mimamsaka forebears the view that the Veda is eternal and uncreated, free from authorship by gods or humans. He thought, rather, that sound exegesis and good philosophy established beyond doubt that Brahman, the really and finally real, is "one only, without a second" (ekam eva advitiam as the Upanisadic text has it). His considerable body of work was devoted to analysis of what this means, and to meeting objections to it, as was that of his numerous followers and commentators.

The central doctrine of the nondualists is simple: that there is just one thing, variously called Brahman, Atman (Self -- the upper-case 'S' represents the metaphysical significance of the term), and (sometimes) isvara ('the lord'); and that this Atman-Brahman is uncompounded, which is to say that no predicates of a substantive sort can rightly be attached to it. Brahman has no temporal properties (the property 'being eternal' is predicated of it, but is understood to mean the denial of all properties that predicate change), no spatial properties, and no properties that indicate internal complexity or division. This is a strictly metaphysical claim, a claim about the way things necessarily are. It has a number of epistemological and psychological correlates, of which the most important for Sankara is the claim that all cognition of diversity, whether of material objects ('this is a house, that is a pot'), or of concepts ('this is an idea of blue, that is an idea of red'), is erroneous. Such cognition is subject to ignorance (avidya) or illusion (maya), and since a very high proportion of cognition is of one of these two kinds, it follows that an equally high proportion of all human cognition is in error and needs

to be corrected. It is a central goal of nondualist thinkers to provide a set of arguments and meditational practices that will bring such error to an end.

One such set of concepts is to be found in a dialogue between teacher and student given by Sankara in a work called Upadesasahasri ('A Thousand Teachings'). This dialogue shows with great clarity that one of the chief intuitions governing Sankara's nondualism is the idea that ignorance, which is understood most fundamentally to be error, the possession of mistaken concepts about multiplicity, is the direct cause of continued bondage in the beginningless process of rebirth and redeath that is called samsara. Sankara thinks that this point can be established exegetically. After quoting a string of Vedic passages he says: "These sruti passages [texts from the Veda, broadly understood] indeed reveal that samsara results from the understanding that Atman is different from Brahman" (Mayeda, 219, modified). If you think that you are genuinely different from the single, eternal, partless, simple Brahman, you will be denying the equation between Atman and Brahman, and as a result enmeshing yourself ever more firmly in the suffering produced by its seeming to you that you are -- and always have been -- subject to rebirth and redeath.

The student, not surprisingly, is puzzled by this. It doesn't seem to him that he is eternal, changeless, partless, and so forth:

Your holiness, when the body is burned or cut, I (Atman) evidently perceive pain and I evidently experience suffering from hunger and so forth. But in all the Srutis and Smrtis [texts derived from the Veda but not strictly part of it], the highest Atman is said to be "free from evil, ageless, deathless, sorrowless, hungerless,

thirstless" ... [and so the Atman is] free from all the attributes of samsara. But I (Atman) am different in essence from it, and bound up with many attributes of samsara. How then can I realize that the highest Atman is my Atman, and that I, a transmigrator, am the highest Atman?--It is as if I were to hold that fire is cold.

(Mayeda, 221, modified)

This is a question about how what seems obviously false (that the Self has no changing properties) can be understood, known to be true, and asserted without contradiction. Sankara's response is that the changing properties in question aren't in fact to be predicated of the Self. Rather, their locus is the discriminating intellect (buddhi): it is this that takes itself to hunger, thirst, be born, and so forth, and it does so because of ignorance. Ignorance acts as kind of prism through which the Self (which is really single and partless) appears manifold and complex. Or, to alter the simile:

... from the standpoint of the highest truth, the Self is one alone and only appears as many through the vision affected by ignorance. It is just as when the moon appears manifold to sight affected by the disease of the eye called timira. (Mayeda, 225, modified)

Timira is probably a form of cataract; it is in any case a defect of the eye that produces double vision. It represents ignorance, which is a defect of the mind that produces multiple vision, the ordinary perception of difference. The question about how to understand and know to be true assertions such as the Self does not change or the Self is

identical with Brahman is then simply answered: remove ignorance, and you'll no longer perceive the Self in any other way. The removal of ignorance permits the truth simply to shine forth, to be 'self-established' as Sankara likes to put it. And the truth that Atman is Brahman is both true and salvific, for coming to know that it is true and to see the world in accordance with its truth is precisely to be liberated from samsara, from the suffering of rebirth and redeath.

Liberation (moksa) on this understanding, is not acquired but acknowledged. This is because it is not a condition that is caused to come to be; it is, rather a condition which has always and changelessly been; and since anything that enters into causal relations must, for Sankara and his school, thereby be considered subject to change and dependence upon something other than itself, it follows that Atman-Brahman cannot be produced. It might seem that it would follow that nothing can be done to bring about liberation from samsara. But this is not so, says Sankara, and to illustrate what he means he often turns to the example of the rope and the snake. If you think a coiled rope on the path in front of you is a snake, you are subject to error. What removes this condition is just and only its complementary cognition this is not a snake, which is entailed by the judgment this is a rope. And for Sankara, knowing is not an act with conditions; if it were, it would be subject to cause and thus changeable. Instead, he thinks of knowing as a condition with content that is always and changelessly what it is. Removing the error this is a snake is an act, and is therefore subject to cause; but since the error was an unreality to begin with (an instance of maya, illusion), what the act produces is the removal of an absence. There is no causal relation between this and the realization of the truth.

Sankara and his school use a technical term to describe and define the act of making a false judgment. It is 'superimposition' (adhyasa), and Sankara devotes a great deal of attention to its analysis because it is the hinge-concept of his entire system, and labels his central conceptual difficulty. If, as he does, you want to claim that all judgments that predicate properties of something are erroneous because the only thing there is cannot, because of its simplicity, have properties predicated of it at all, you will then have to explain just what a predicative judgment is and in what its error consists, and (still more difficult) how such judgments can come to be made at all if monism is true.

Sankara's ordinary definition of superimposition is: "The apparent presentation of the attributes of one thing in another thing" (Thibaut, vol.1, p.5). It is an act of judgment of the form S is p, and Sankara's favorite examples are the rope-snake, already mentioned; the judgment that a tree-trunk seen from a distance is a man walking; and the judgment that the shiny inner surface of an oyster shell is really silver. In all these cases, an object is presented to the senses (a coil of rope, a tree-trunk, an opened oyster shell), and a property is 'superimposed' on it which it does not in fact possess (snakehood, personhood, silverness -- Sanskrit delights in abstract nouns, and forms them much more easily than does English). This model is then applied to all predicative judgments; but there is a difficulty for the radical monist produced by the fact that a superimposing judgment requires a real object or locus upon which or toward which the judgment predicates a property that is in fact absent there. The only candidate for such an object or locus is the Atman-Brahman, for this is the only thing there is. The predicative judgments that thing coiled on the path in front of me is a snake, and that thing coiled on the path in front

of me is a rope are alike in being, finally, judgments whose object as Atman-Brahman, and that (falsely) superimpose properties upon the Atman-Brahman which it does not possess. The judgments are dissimilar, of course, in that one makes a conventionally true claim and the other a conventionally false claim. But the central difficulty for Sankara and his followers is to explain how it is that the nondual Atman-Brahman can be the locus or object of ignorance (all superimposition is ignorance), for that is what the theory seems to require.

Sankara, it must be said, does not so much solve this difficulty as label it with some precision. He agrees that all judgments, even those about such matters as how life is to be lived, which sacrificial actions are to be performed, and what is one's own personal history, are instances of ignorance, deploying superimposition. He agrees, too, that there is no beginning to the process whereby such judgments are made, and that the relation between the simple, uncompounded Atman-Brahman and the endless play of erroneous judgments is one that cannot finally be understood but merely described:

And so, the producer of the notion of the 'I' ... is superimposed upon the inner Atman, which, in reality, is the witness of all modifications ... in this way there continues this beginningless and endless superimposition; it appears in the form of wrong conception, and is the cause of individual selves appearing as agents and enjoyers of their actions and the results of their actions, and is observed by everyone. (Thibaut, vol.1, p.9, modified)

The eternal and changeless Atman-Brahman is a "witness" to change, and change is superimposed upon it by the "individual selves," which are

themselves nothing other than it. There is no genuine causal relation between witness and what is witnessed; there is only eternal parallelism or juxtaposition between the two. The imagery used by Sankara identifies the difficulty without solving it.

The same question arises again when Sankara treats the question of how the multiplicity of the material world is related to the unity of Brahman. This changes the sphere of discourse from the psychological or conceptual (what is the relation between my changing self and the changeless Self that I really am?) to the material or cosmological (what is the relation between Atman-Brahman and the multitude of material objects?), but remains with essentially the same question. Sankara's view here is that although there is a sense in which such things as houses and pots must be effects (karya) of Brahman, this can only properly be said if it is emphasized that the effect is already present in the cause and is a kind of illusory transformation of it. This is the best way of putting matters for Sankara because it guards against the two main errors that concern him: first, the error of affirming that Brahman produces something other than itself, which would have to be said if the effect were not already present in the cause; second, the mistake of saying that the alterations or modifications apparently undergone by Brahman in producing the manifold world are anything other than apparent. If they were real rather than apparent then, even if the effects were not other than Brahman, they would still have to be understood to produce real change in Brahman, which would contradict the view that Brahman does not change.

Sankara's picture of the world-Brahman relation, then, is that Brahman is both efficient cause (nimitta) and material cause (pradhana) of the world. This is sometime put by saying that Brahman has a power (sakti) called "illusion" (maya), and that it is this which acts as the

material cause of the world. Putting matters this way stresses that the world in all its variety must also be illusory, since the effects of a material cause must always share in the nature of its cause. But since illusion is itself not separate from or ontologically other than Brahman, to say that illusion (or ignorance) is the material cause of the world is just to say the same of Brahman.

For Sankara, then, the world of trees and houses and pots and persons is nothing but a set of illusory modifications of Atman-Brahman. The point of saying so, however, is not to utter a truth about the nature of Atman-Brahman. It is, rather, to make certain errors cease to function, to remove ignorance. The point of identifying the single, changeless Atman-Brahman in the way that advocates of the divine as nondual typically do, then, is not accurately to describe Atman-Brahman, but rather to bring to an end a set of peculiarly painful mistakes. This is philosophy as medicine, perhaps, philosophy as that which can, by verbal and meditational therapy, remove the pain in an amputated limb, a non-existent locus for pain. The following passage is suggestive of what Sankara means:

A man who wishes to attain this view of the highest truth should abandon the fivefold form of desire ... which results from the misconception that such things as caste and stage of life belong to the Atman. And as this conception is contradictory to the right conception, the reasoning for negating the view that Atman is different from Brahman is possible. For when the conception that the Atman is not subject to samsara has been brought into being by scripture and reasoning, no contradictory conception persists. For a conception that fire is cold, or that the

body is not subject to old age and death, does not exist.

(Mayeda, 226-227, modified)

Instances of error (of ignorance/illusion) are here likened to incoherent judgments like fire is cold, and are said, straightforwardly, not to exist. They are removed just by coming to see them for what they are, which is, roughly, empty forms of words. Their removal, then, may be brought about by argument or some other kind of practice; but the point of such argument or practice is not to establish, or get taken as true, the contradictories of the incoherent judgments in question. It is, rather, just to remove them. And to apply the analogy, the point of Sankara's Advaita Vedanta is not to establish itself as true, but rather to prevent its competitors from continuing as lively options ("no contradictory conception persists"), and so to bring to an end the suffering that inevitably accompanies any realistically pluralist view.

Sankara's Advaita is not, then, only or even principally a nontheistic conception of the divine (though it is -- or includes -- such understandings). It is, instead, a theory and practice of salvation, to which the identification of the divine as nondual is instrumental. As with the prior Mimamsa's identification of the divine as a text, Sankara's position is unlikely to carry much conviction to those who do not already hold it. Following the arguments and tactics of Sankara and his epigones may nonetheless offer important and useful clarifications of western attempts to argue for nonduality (Plotinus and Spinoza offer the most eloquent examples); it may also provoke further thought about why Christian, Jewish, and Islamic thinkers have been so concerned, unlike Sankara, to reject the idea that everything other than God is unreal.

The Divine as Buddha

Buddhism began in India in the fourth or fifth century before Christ. Although most of the details of its beginning are obscure, there is little doubt that the teachings of a man later to be called Gautama Sakyamuni and to be given the honorific title 'Buddha' (awakened one) were among the factors of greatest importance. Unlike the Mimamsa and the Vedanta, Buddhism did not recognize the authority of the Veda, and did not develop its thought by interpreting Vedic texts. Instead -- to make a long and complicated story much too short -- Buddhist philosophy in India developed in large part by considering what it might mean to think of Gautama Sakyamuni, the Buddha, as of maximal and final significance -- which is to say as divine.

The legend of the Buddha, which had taken firm shape by the second century BC, unambiguously presents him as a human being, even if a rather unusual one. He is born to a human mother, though in miraculous fashion; he grows to maturity in wealthy surroundings and is educated in a manner appropriate to his class; he renounces his life of luxury (and, in some versions, his wife and son) when the facts of human suffering become unbearably weighty to him; he spends years seeking the roots of suffering and its cure, and eventually finds them; when he does, he is awakened (becomes Buddha) to the truth, and this fact is marked by cosmic appreciation, including recognition and praise from the Vedic gods (this is one of the threads in the fabric of Buddhism that led Helmuth von Glasenapp (1971) to characterize, aptly, Buddhism as a trans-polytheistic religion rather than simply as an

atheistic one). After his awakening, Buddha begins to teach the truths he had discovered (this is his dharma, or doctrine), and in so doing to found a monastic order (the sangha) to preserve and transmit the doctrine. Eventually, at an advanced age, he dies. Buddhist speculation about the divine then focuses primarily upon his person and secondarily upon his teaching and the community he founded.

Much intellectual energy was devoted by Buddhists to anti-theistic argument. This is not to say that Indian Buddhists rejected the existence of deities such as Indra, Brahma, and Visnu. It is rather to say that they rejected the idea that there is or could be an eternal, omniscient, omnipotent creator of all that is, and so also argued against the idea that any member of the Indian pantheon could be such a god. In arguing against the coherence of the idea of such a god, Buddhists were arguing with the many Indian thinkers who strongly affirmed it. This debate, which had a thousand-year history in India and which developed to a high pitch of scholastic precision and subtlety, is best thought of as an episode in the history of argument about a god very much like the God of Abraham. As such, it falls outside the scope of this essay, although its particulars should be of considerable interest to philosophers working in the Jewish or Christian or Islamic traditions, since it provides a splendid example of anti-theistic argument developed independently of those traditions. (Some references to works on theistic and anti-theistic argument in India are given in the bibliography at the end of this essay.)

Buddhists, then, reject (the Indian version of) the God of Abraham. But in thinking about what it might mean to understand Buddhism as maximally great they approached in some ways interestingly closely to the Abrahamic idea. Buddha's divinity is certainly closer to the Abrahamic divine than is either the textual divine of the

Mimamsakas or the nondual divine of the Advaita Vedantins, and this is mostly because Buddhist philosophers began their speculations about the maximally and finally significant by thinking about a person, as also did the theorists of the Abrahamic religions.

Speculation about the Buddha had its roots in devotional practice. From as far back as our texts go, Buddhists gave homage and praise to Buddha, naming him "fully and completely awakened," "accomplished in knowledge and virtuous conduct," "knower of worlds," and "teacher of gods and humans." These titles were analyzed and commented upon by Buddhist thinkers much as were the honorifics given to Jesus in the New Testament by Christians; and as such analysis and commentary developed it is easy to see a movement toward attributing significance to Buddha that goes far beyond what can be borne by any particular human person. For one thing, the gods of whom Buddha is said to be the teacher are extraordinarily long-lived (though not, in the Buddhist view either eternal or everlasting), and if Buddha is always to be their teacher his teaching activity cannot be limited to the life-span of a particular individual in India 2400 years or so ago. For another, Buddhist cosmology is remarkably generous in scope, both temporal and spatial (more so even than that of modern science), and if Buddha is really to be a knower of all worlds and a teacher of their inhabitants, his knowledge cannot, it seems, be limited and constrained as that of human individuals ordinarily is. These and similar considerations led to the development of concepts that made it possible to think of Gautama Sakyamuni as a token of a type rather than as a unique particular. Sakyamuni the Buddha became Sakyamuni a Buddha (the tradition attributes this view to Sakyamuni himself, and it certainly goes back as far as far as we can trace Buddhist ideas), and the

question then became how best to think about the class-category 'Buddha' of which Sakyamuni is a member.

The principal categories used for this purpose were those of the three bodies. Buddha, it came to be said, had three bodies, where the term 'body' means something like mode of being or (as we shall see) mode of appearing.

The first of these bodies is the body of magical transformation (nirmana-kaya). There are many of these; Sakyamuni is an instance. Each body of magical transformation is born to a particular woman at a particular time and place, and each has a career whose outlines are like those of Sakyamuni's: he discovers the answer to the problem of suffering, teaches this answer as an awakened one, founds a community of disciples, and so on. Each body of magical transformation, it is said, appears to have imperfections: each must learn what all humans must learn (language, good social habits, and so forth), and must do so by being taught. Each appears to need food and sleep, and to suffer death. But Buddha cannot really have properties such as these, argued Buddhists; if it did it would not be maximally significant and, *ex definitio*, not Buddha. And so these properties must be of a special kind. They must be apparent, properties that Buddha seems to have but does not really possess. Further, these must be apparent properties that are caused to come into being by the needs of living beings other than Buddha. This idea springs from the claim that Buddha is maximally salvifically efficacious with respect to the liberation of non-Buddhas from suffering, and so any apparent properties Buddha has must serve that end and must therefore be caused by the needs of those beings who are not yet liberated. Buddha in its various bodies of magical transformation appears to teach and walk and sleep and eat, then, in very much the same way that the moon appears to me to be a disc about

the size of a half-dollar; or, to use a favorite Buddhist image, Buddha is a wish-fulfilling gem, a cintamani. Such a gem has as a property intrinsic or proper to it only that it grants to all who come into contact with it what they most desire. It has as emergent and apparent properties the granting of particular wishes. Just so for the bodies of magical transformation.

The second kind of body is of a logically similar sort. It is called the body of communal enjoyment (sambhoga-kaya), and of it too there are many tokens differentiated one from another by the possession of different emergently apparent properties. As with the bodies of magical transformation, there is a fundamental narrative that applies to each body of communal enjoyment. It is Buddha in residence in a gorgeously-ornamented heavenly realm, Buddha present as a magnificently beautiful body around which advanced practitioners -- bodhisattvas -- can gather and listen to teaching and offer praise. The various heavenly realms in which bodies of communal enjoyment reside and teach are caused to come into being by the needs of bodhisattvas: these beings have progressed beyond the point at which they can benefit from interacting with a body of magical transformation like Gautama Sakyamuni, and their needs are met by the heavenly Buddhas of communal enjoyment.

There is yet a third body, the "real body" (dharma-kaya), which is what Buddha is in itself. This body is single or unique, unlike the bodies of magical transformation and communal enjoyment. The real body, as its name already suggests, has no emergent or apparent properties. It has only essential properties, each of which is therefore eternal (beginningless, endless, changeless) like the real body itself. In analyzing the real body, the classical texts of the Indian Buddhist tradition tend to speak first of its knowledge or awareness, and then

of its more properly metaphysical properties. The upshot of these analyses is that the real body's awareness is said to be universal (all that can be known is known to it), error-free, and without change: it knows what it knows effortlessly and spontaneously, just as a mirror reflects what is before it. The real body has non-propositional omniscience, changeless knowledge-by-acquaintance of everything knowable. But this is not all. The real body is also eternally and changelessly free from any kind of suffering or imperfection -- it is, as the texts usually say, eternally and naturally pure, not produced by causes, and not capable of being other than it is. It is also maximally efficacious in liberating other beings from suffering, and it does this by appearing to them as a body of magical transformation or a body of communal enjoyment. But even these appearances, these comings-to-be of emergently apparent properties, do not occur as a result of any particular volitions or intentions that Buddha has. They are, rather, like the moon's reflection in a pool of water: as the pool's surface changes (ruffled by the wind, shrunk by the hot sun), so the reflected image appears to change, but not because of any decision taken by the moon. An exhaustive account, then, of causes producing the emergence of a particular body of magical transformation or communal enjoyment can be given by describing the needs of particular living beings at a particular time.

A more abstract restatement of this picture would look like this:

(1) Buddha is maximally salvifically efficacious,

which is axiomatic: this is just what it means to be Buddha. (1) is coupled with

(2) Buddha is single,

which is to say that all plurality and multiplicity in Buddha is apparent, constituted exhaustively by emergently apparent properties such as seems to be instructing me in the dharma now. And then, because of the strong intuition that accurate awareness is a good thing, and the judgment that Buddha must have all good things, there is:

(3) Buddha is omniscient,

which, when understood as briefly discussed above, is taken to mean:

(4) Buddha has no beliefs.

(4) is required because on the usual understanding of what it is to have a belief (that is, to have a propositional attitude), believers are related to the states of affairs about which they have beliefs indirectly, and this is not something properly said of Buddha. Buddha has all the states of affairs known to it (and that is all the states of affairs that can be known) directly present to its awareness. (3) is also understood to require:

(5) Buddha has no nonveridical awareness,

because all the factors that might cause nonveridical awareness (greed, hatred, ignorance, and so on) are by definition lacking in Buddha. (3) also suggests:

(6) Buddha's awareness requires no volition, effort, or

attentiveness,

for reasons already canvassed. We may add:

(7) Buddha has no temporal properties.

This too is partly axiomatic: subjection to time and change would make Buddha less than maximally salvifically efficacious, just as knowing states of affairs temporally, as they come into being and pass away, would be less perfect than knowing them eternally. But (7) must be held together with:

(8) Buddha seems to non-Buddhas to have temporal properties,

in the various senses already discussed.

(1)-(8) raise a number of difficulties much discussed by Buddhist thinkers. Among them is the question of whether Buddhas can, on the model of Buddhahood explored here, remember the past. It seems not, for on most accounts of memory, some causal relation to a past event or events seems required, and this may be ruled out by (6) and (7). This was of concern to Buddhists because on other grounds they wanted to say that Buddhas can remember their previous lives, and it is hard to see how such memory, even if it is restricted to bodies of magical transformation, can be categorized as an emergently apparent property as it would seemingly have to be. Another difficulty was found in the tendency of this way of thinking to lead to something like Sankara's nondualism, a conclusion that Buddhist thinkers wanted on many grounds to avoid.

But it is beyond the scope of this essay to look more closely at these Buddhist discussions. They are, for the most part, discussions about whether the views of Buddhahood that had developed by the fifth century AD or so in India required the abandonment or modification of other items of Buddhist doctrine. They are not -- again, for the most part -- based on worries about whether the set of propositions (1)-(8) is internally consistent. It seemed so to Buddhist theorists, and it seems probably so to me.

Further Reading

Good general works on the style and substance of Indian philosophico-religious thought include: Matilal (1985), Mohanty (2000), Ganeri (2001), and Phillips (1995). In addition, there is the Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, whose general editor is Karl H. Potter, and which now numbers eight volumes. These volumes provide descriptive and analytical material on the various Indian schools, together with summaries of the content and arguments of the main texts. The volumes edited by Potter (1981), Coward & Raja (1990), Potter et al. (1996), and Potter (1999) have proved useful in the preparation of this essay.

Useful secondary sources on the matters discussed under 'The Divine Text' include: Bilimoria (1988), D'Sa (1980), Clooney (1990), Matilal (1994). Jha (1986) provides a translation of a Buddhist doxographical work which contains extensive (and accurate) exposition and critical analysis of Mimamsa ideas. Sandal (1980) gives a

translation (not always either reliable or comprehensible) of the foundational work of the prior Mimamsa.

For the matters discussed under 'The Nondual Divine' Thibaut (1962) and Mayeda (1979) provide English translations of two of Sankara's main works. Useful secondary sources include Deutsch (1969) and Clooney (1993). The most systematic treatment of the philosophical idea of nonduality is to be found in Loy (1999); this treats materials from many cultures and traditions.

For further exploration of the matters discussed under 'The Divine as Buddha': Williams (1989) is a philosophically useful treatment of Buddhist thought in general. Hayes (1988), Jackson (1986), Griffiths (1999), and Patil (2001) discuss Buddhist anti-theistic argumentation. The most comprehensive treatments of Buddhist theories about the nature of the Buddha are Griffiths (1994) and Makransky (1997). Translations of Buddhist texts treating this topic may be found in Griffiths et al. (1989), and also in Jha (1986).

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