

Today's Lecture

- Administrative stuff
- Preliminary comments about Vedanta
- Advaita Vedanta
- Vishishtadvaita Vedanta

Administrative stuff

- The spreadsheet containing your overall grades so far is now online (it excludes the marks for the latest quiz). Just go to the course site and follow the relevant link. If there are any discrepancies I should know about, please let me know. (I've already had one discrepancy, so do check.)
- Keep the grading legend that came with your graded assignment. I will be using that legend for each of your assignments.

Last Lecture

- Any lingering questions?

Preliminary comments about Vedanta

- It is traditional to divide the *Vedas* into two *general* sections: (1) That which concerns itself with ritual and proper action (or *karma-kanda*) and (2) that which concerns itself with metaphysical knowledge (or *jnana-kanda*). Mimamsa concerns itself with *karma-kanda*, while Vedanta concerns itself with *jnana-kanda* (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.78).
- ‘*Kanda*’ simply means ‘section’.

Preliminary comments about Vedanta

- According to Vedanta the purpose of the *Vedas* is to provide knowledge of Ultimate Reality (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.81). Those passages having to do with ritual and right action, those containing myths (or stories of the gods), serve to ready us for this knowledge.
- For Vedanta, then, both *Nirguna* and *Saguna Brahman* continue to play a significant role in their talk of the Absolute.
- A word of caution: Don't expect the Vedantan philosophers to agree with one another on key teachings. There are some significant disagreements as you move through the three basic schools of Vedanta.

Preliminary comments about Vedanta

- There are three basic schools of Vedanta: (1) Advaita Vedanta, (2) Vishishtadvaita Vedanta and (3) Dvaita Vedanta (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.81).
- Each of the three schools provides you with a way of relating *Brahman*, *Atman* and the empirical world (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.81).
- As Koller rightly points out, taken together these three schools of Vedanta exhaust how one might relate *Brahman* and the world. Consequently, they “constitute the three basic interpretations of the *Upanishads*” (Koller *Asian Philosophies* p.81)

Advaita Vedanta

- Perhaps the most well known, and certainly one of the key, philosophers of Advaita Vedanta is Shankara. **It is his version** of Advaita Vedanta that we will be briefly looking at.
- There are two central tenets of Advaita Vedanta: (1) *Brahman* alone is unconditionally real (or that which is truly real) and (2) *Atman* and *Brahman* are identical (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.82).
- The world of experience is, ultimately, unreal (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.82).
- This reflects, in part, the priority Shankara gives to deep meditative experience when making judgments about the nature of Reality (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.82). (I.e. what is metaphysically true is revealed in deep meditation.)

Steps in understanding Shankara

- Shankara's view of causality reveals a way of understanding his perspective on Non-dualism.
- Causality happens as a matter of *experiential* 'reality' (what Koller describes as empirical existence [Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.87]). Here we have an admission of experience (see Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.82, 84-88).
- This empirical existence is not to be reduced to a mere dream-like awareness or an illusory state (*at least in any simple sense*) (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.87-88).

Steps in understanding Shankara

- Shankara continues to treat the distinction between perceptual error and perceptual/empirical knowledge as meaningful (though with the caveat that the metaphysics of perceptual knowledge must be radically reconceptualized).
- Shankara continues to treat the distinction between dreaming and waking states (and the claims to knowledge which can be made in each context) as meaningful (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.87).
- In both cases, however, these distinctions are only meaningful from a certain perspective.

Steps in understanding Shankara

- *Brahman* as That Which Is (or unqualified reality) does not undergo change, is unitary (non-dual), does not act, and does not undergo pain or suffering.
- **SINCE** causality happens as a matter of empirical existence (in fact this is one of the fundamental characteristics of empirical existence), **AND** causality essentially involves change, empirical existence *cannot* be unqualified reality (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.87-88).
- Without *Brahman* empirical existence could not exist (this is conceding the point that *Brahman* is the underlying reality onto which the non-*Brahman* is superimposed). But empirical existence is not reducible to *Brahman* (other wise empirical existence could be described as *Brahman*).

Steps in understanding Shankara

- At the level of *Brahman* awareness/consciousness there is no multiplicity or duality.
- At the level of *Brahman* awareness/consciousness there is no (individual) subject versus object. The appearance that there is you as opposed to me, and me as opposed to you is illusory.
- The cause of the appearance of multiplicity or duality, when in Reality there is no such thing, is ignorance (or *avidya*). This is likened to what happens when misperception occurs in our experience. As we superimpose the qualities of a snake onto a rope when mistaking a rope for a snake, so the qualities of non-*Atman/Brahman* are superimposed onto *Atman/Brahman* (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.87).
- Imposed by whom? you might ask. Shankara doesn't say.

Steps in understanding Shankara

- From within the limited perspective arising from empirical existence questions can arise about the relation of experience to non-dual Reality (i.e. *Brahman*). However, any explanation within this framework will be ‘tainted’ with, or colored by, ignorance (lack of Knowledge) (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.87-88).

Steps in understanding Shankara

- Within the realm of duality talk of the beginning of empirical existence quickly becomes talk of creation.
- *Brahman* within this context is understood as *Saguna Brahman* (Ishvara, Devi or the like) (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.82).
- The individual soul as embodied Self relates to *Saguna Brahman* as a devotee (i.e. through *bhakti*).
- Release is achieved through the elimination of ignorance or through knowledge of *Atman/Brahman*.
- For Shankara, knowledge/awareness of *Atman/Brahman* (i.e. that is non-dual Reality) *constitutes* release (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.88).

Vishishtadvaita and Dvaita Vedanta

- It is important to see that both Ramanuja and Madhva are reacting to Shankara's monism. Both Ramanuja and Madhva are devote Vaishnavites (devotees of Vishnu), and their devotion to Vishnu and the religious narratives surrounding Vishnu, informs the metaphysics they offer as alternatives to Advaita Vedanta.
- Think of it this way. While Shankara sees devotionism as a means to an end, ultimately prioritizing *jnana* over *bhakti* in the pursuit of *moksha*, Ramanuja and Madhva prioritize devotion.

Vishishtadvaita Vedanta: Ramanuja

- Though a quite common way to translate ‘Vishishtadvaita’ is ‘qualified non-dualism’ this *can be* misleading. For this reason certain scholars prefer the phrase ‘the non-duality of the qualified’.
- Ramanuja, *though holding a monistic view of reality, does not* view individuals, objects in the world or the cosmos itself as lacking reality (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.89).