

Today's Lecture

- Administrative stuff
- Really beginning the *Upanishads*

Administrative stuff

- The Bookstore assures me that the new order of Koller texts has arrived.
- I have graded the quizzes. I owe you an apology for the appearance of your submissions. I was caught in the rain yesterday and discovered, after the fact, that my bag is not very water-proof. The discoloration of your submissions is the result of a rain soaked inter-campus mail envelope ... though it may look like something else.
- Good job on this first quiz.

Upanishads and the Vedas

- Remember that the *Upanishads* consist of reflections on that which underlies, or underpins, Vedic religious thought and practice (including Vedic sacrificial ritual) (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.5, 19-20).
- The principal *Upanishads* (i.e. the early *Upanishads*) are often viewed as the end (*vedanta*) of the *Vedas* (a ‘cap’ as it were on the *Aranyakas* [or *Forest Treatises*], which are, in turn, a ‘cap’ on the *Brahmanas* [or *Commentaries*]).

Note for future reference

- A number of scholars point to the emergence of the *Upanishads* as the beginnings of a move away from the traditional Vedic Religion.
- The early (or principal) *Upanishads*, it is believed, were being formulated at or around the same time as an adoption of a hierarchical stratification of Indian society based upon the *Varnas*. The *Varnadharmas*, as it is now known, does not stand alone, however. Along with an adoption of this social hierarchy we find the emergence of doctrines concerning rebirth and karma.
- Why might a social hierarchy and the doctrines of rebirth and karma arise together? Think along the lines of ‘getting one’s just desert’ and being reborn.

Note for future reference

- Some of these same scholars see this move away from the traditional Vedic Religion as a revival (of sorts) of some of the pre-Aryan/non-Aryan traditions. (More details on the *Varnadharmā*, rebirth and karma to come).
- Think of the references to Aryan culture as references to, at the very least, the emergence of a culture hitherto not dominant in the North-West sub-continent in and around 1500 B.C.E.

Upanishads

- The term '*upanishad*' comes from the words: *sad* – 'to sit'; *upa* – 'near'; *ni* – 'down' (John Grimes. 1996. *A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), p.329).
- This implies that the teaching requires a disciple – guru relationship ... something you won't find in this class (or in a class environment in general).
- These texts, then, can be understood as containing secret teaching.
- This means that there are at least two layers to the text: a surface meaning and a deeper meaning that requires the direction of a guru (or teacher).

Upanishads – the questions

- Two questions inform much of the discussion in the *Upanishads*:
- (1) What is the underlying fundamental essence, nature or ground of objects or events in the world (or ‘outer reality’)?
- (2) What is the underlying fundamental essence, nature or ground of the self (or ‘inner reality’)?
(Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.20.)
- How might we relate these questions related?
- Think of it this way: I’m in *your* outer world, but I have an ‘inner world’ (in which *you* are in *my* outer world).

Upanishads – the questions

- It gets even more interesting.
- In *deep* meditation, Hindu practitioners often claim that they move beyond conceptual thought, beyond the duality of ‘me and that’, or subject and object (see Koller’s discussion on pages 21-23 of *Asian Philosophies*).
- IF such a state exists, and admittedly this is a big ‘if’, then what will be the perception of That Which Is?
- Will this yield a universal claim about Reality or only one limited or indexed to your own subjective experience?
Before you answer, remember that, IF such a state exists, in that state there is no objective-subjective contrast.

Upanishads – underlying theory of knowledge

- Remember that there are two prominent sources of knowledge for Upanishadic philosophers: (1) Vedic scriptures and (2) meditation (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.19-20).
- To defend their views Upanishadic philosophers tend to point to one or the other of these sources of knowledge (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.20).
- You need to distinguish the defense of their views from their explication. In explicating their views, Upanishadic philosophers use stories, myth and common experience.

Upanishads – underlying theory of knowledge

- In evaluating the overall epistemic value of claims made in Upanishadic philosophy you need to give some thought to the evaluation of scriptural authority and meditation, *AS WELL AS* the *form* this evaluation will take regarding either putative source of knowledge.
- What is it for a body of scriptures to be *rightly* regarded as authoritative?
- Are there objective criteria (or criteria that will survive philosophical criticism) for infallibility?

Upanishads – underlying theory of knowledge

- Do note Koller's comments (on page 20 of your *Asian Philosophies*) that at least one accepted formal criterion of testing the truth of putative claims of knowledge, accepted by the Upanishadic philosophers, is whether the claims are internally consistent/coherent.

Upanishads – underlying theory of knowledge

- We can look for internal inconsistencies or even coherence with known truths, but even if such inquiries yield results that make us disposed to trust *some* of the relevant scriptural passages, it may be the case that matters lying outside of verifiable fact or truth are falsely presented within the relevant texts.

Upanishads – underlying theory of knowledge

- Can we think of *prima facie* (or initial) reasons to think that meditation may well be a source of knowledge?
- Think of introspection or memory, and the contexts in which we think they may yield true beliefs.

Upanishads – underlying theory of knowledge

- With either source of knowledge we tend to think that such matters as careful attentiveness, critical self-awareness, and a measured degree of skepticism (a recognition that we may be wrong) should be present when making knowledge claims.
- But careful attentiveness and critical self-awareness are virtues to be also cultivated by practitioners of meditation. Only when these virtues are properly cultivated are our observations during meditation to enjoy a (to-be-specified) degree of epistemic value.

Upanishads – underlying theory of knowledge

- Two worries about regarding meditation as a source of knowledge: (i) It is not infallible and (ii) may not yield ‘unique knowledge’ (or knowledge that can only be gained through the relevant meditation technique), unlike, say, perception or reason.
- Re (i): Neither introspection nor memory are infallible. Indeed both are open to manipulation and distortion (think of false consciousness or false memory).
- Re (ii): It is not clear that memory yields knowledge only to be gained through that ‘faculty’.

Upanishads - Brahman as all-embracing reference

- The word '*brahman*' was originally used to talk about (the power underlying) a Vedic prayer (as contained in the *Rig Veda*) or spell (as contained in the *Atharva Veda*).
- Its meaning undergoes a change when it is used to speak of (the power underlying) *all* the utterances contained in Vedic Ritual or in the *Vedas*.
- The change to such an emphasis corresponds to the change in direction of Vedic religion mentioned before AND a growing concern to understand the causal connection between language/word/sound and success in Vedic ritual (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.20).