

Today's Lecture

- Administrative stuff
- Continuing the *Upanishads*

Administrative stuff

- Remember the in-class quizzes are marked out of 1. If you received a '1' you got 100% on that quiz.
- The next quiz will scope over both lecture material and readings.
- Remember the deadline for the first assignment (October 16th) is approaching. If you have questions about the direction you are taking in your assignment don't hesitate to come and see me.

Upanishads - Brahman as all-embracing reference

- Where we left off:
- 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 (e.g. the rise of shamanistic elements in Vedic religion) AND a growing concern to understand the causal connection between language/word/sound and success in Vedic ritual (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.20).

Upanishads - Brahman as all-embracing reference

- With the Vedic ritual viewed as a means to manipulate the cosmic powers or elements of nature, *Brahman* becomes connected to the power underlying it (that is the ritual) and so that which underlies the cosmic powers or elements of nature (thus providing a causal link between sound or ritual and physical events in the greater environment).
- Note that this has a few notable consequences. (1) *Brahman* becomes associated with the ground, essential nature or even the underlying governing power of what we see around us. (2) *Brahman* is not personal, *per se*. (3) We can enter into a relation (of sorts) with *Brahman* (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.20).

Upanishads - Nirguna and Saguna Brahman

- Within the *Upanishads Brahman* can be regarded as qualified or unqualified (with or without [positive] attributes).
- *Nirguna Brahman* is *Brahman* **without** positive attributes (e.g. unchanging, not mortal, unseen, without form).
- *Saguna Brahman* is *Brahman* **with** positive attributes (e.g. pure consciousness, being, Truth, bliss).
- (If you want to see a respected perspective on Brahman other than Koller, see Klaus Klostermaier's 1994 book *A Survey of Hinduism* [Second Edition].)

Upanishads - Nirguna and Saguna Brahman

- The motivation for such a distinction is *fairly* straightforward.
- If you want to talk of That which *underlies all that we see around us*, you won't want to use vocabulary that gains its significance through our shared experience (or our interaction with all that we see around us).
- Since our talk of qualities or properties involves, at some level, appeals to what we see around us (or have experienced), we must abandon such talk when describing the ground of every-thing (including experience).
- Thus, *Nirguna Brahman* (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.20-21).

Upanishads - Nirguna and Saguna Brahman

- The talk of *Saguna Brahman* is harder to motivate, but we can still see how we can.
- If we have experience of *Brahman*, say at some deep level of meditation, and we want to reflect on it *post hoc*, enter into a relationship with *Brahman*, or communicate something about the experience of *Brahman* to others, we will want to describe it (i.e. the experience).
- To do so we will have to use terms familiar to ourselves and others. And this means using terms that derive their meaning largely from shared experience.
- Thus, *Saguna Brahman* (if you want a sneak peek of where this goes, see Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.94 [and following]).

Upanishads - Nirguna and Saguna Brahman

- What is difficult, but interesting, about reading the principal (or early) *Upanishads* is that you will find references to **both** *Nirguna* and *Saguna Brahman*.
- It appears that both are accepted, though incompatible, ways of talking and thinking about *Brahman* within Upanishadic philosophy.
- Arguably, this reflects the ‘double lives’ of those who meditate. On the one hand meditators have the experience gained through deep and stable periods of meditation. On the other hand meditators have the experience gained through going about, and reflecting on, their mundane daily affairs. In each sphere of experience, it is understandable and reasonable to find a place for Brahman.

Upanishads - Nirguna and Saguna Brahman

- Over time *Nirguna Brahman* (or *Brahman* without positive attributes) gives rise to the monism in Hindu thought ... the view that, ultimately, All is One (or All is *Brahman*).
- Monism is the view that reality is fundamentally comprised of one kind of 'stuff' (as opposed to two kinds, which would be Dualism) (see Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.81 for a sneak peek).
- (A contemporary Western monism would be the view that all that exists is, fundamentally, comprised of matter. A contemporary Western dualism would have us believe that all that exists is, fundamentally, comprised of matter or spirit.)

Upanishads - Nirguna and Saguna Brahman

- Over time *Saguna Brahman* gives rise to theism (which is derived from the Greek word *theos* for ‘god’) in Hindu thought (see Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.94-95 for yet another sneak peek).
- Ishvara (*Brahman* thought of as male) or Devi (*Brahman* thought of as female) are two traditional ways of thinking of *Saguna Brahman*. Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma and Durga are also traditional forms of *Brahman*.
- Neither gendered approach to thinking of *Brahman* is regarded as superior to the other.
- In this way, Hindu theism stands in stark contrast to Christian or Islamic theism. This is paradoxical since in both Christianity and Islam God lacks a physical form and thus, arguably, a gender (*pace* Christ of course).

Upanishads - Nirguna Brahman and the way of negativity

- The adoption of a *via negativa* to talk of *Brahman* is at least partially motivated by the aforementioned desire to go beyond the discourse that arises from experience.
- *Brahman* then becomes ‘not this, not that’ (or *neti, neti*) (see Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.94).
- This should not be a surprise. Think of any given object and the properties it enjoys. If *Brahman* is somehow beyond this object (and all objects) and its properties (and all their properties), then using such property concepts to describe *Brahman* becomes unintelligible. It becomes more philosophically appealing to say of *Brahman* that, though we can’t talk *substantively* of what It/He/She is, we can say *what It/He/She is not* (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.20-21).

Upanishads - Nirguna Brahman and the way of negativity

- This is an extremely important development. *Because Brahman cannot, on this account, be adequately described, It cannot, as the ground of outer reality, be talked about, be thought about or become the object of devotion.*
- If you, then, follow the Upanishadic philosophers down the way of negativity you reach an epistemological impasse (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.21, 24).

Upanishads - Nirguna Brahman and the way of negativity

- The cost to walking the *via negativa*:
- (1) *Brahman* remains in some substantive sense “elusive and mysterious” (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.21).
- (2) This, in turn, seems to indicate that our knowledge of *Brahman* must be sparse or substantially lacking (at least unless we are sages).

Upanishads - Nirguna Brahman and the way of negativity

- (3) This will make it difficult to make, *and test*, substantial claims about the fundamental or ultimate nature of Reality (and this will include testing the claims of putative sages).
- (4) If substantial knowledge about the ultimate nature of Reality is required for liberation from *samsara* (or *moksha*), we may be screwed (at least in this birth and many births to come).
- Arguably, this impasse fuels the move towards theism. It also explains the significance attached to the claim that *Brahman* is identical to *Atman*.

Upanishads – Atman

- Motivating the Upanishadic view of *Atman* is, once again, *fairly* straightforward.
- Take a look at the passage from the *Mandukya Upanishad* on page 1 of your *Course Pack*.
- We commonly think of ourselves in the following way.
 - (1) If nothing else I am conscious (i.e. as a self, or a subject of experience, I am conscious).
 - (2) But I am not *merely* conscious. I do sleep, which involves being unconscious (or, for the Upanishadic philosophers, being at a different level of consciousness than when I am awake).

Upanishads – Atman

- (3) I am not merely consciousness and unconsciousness. When in deep sleep I have no experience at all (or at least experience of which I have a memory), I don't suddenly cease to exist. That is, I don't 'wink out' of existence in deep sleep and then come back into existence when I begin to dream or awaken.
- (4) But I'm not merely my body. After all, I can lose bits from my body and remain me.