

Today's Lecture

- A clip from *The Matrix*
- Concluding the *Upanishads*

A clip from *The Matrix*

- Someone on Thursday emailed an important question about the relationship between Saguna Brahman and Nirguna Brahman. If, it was asked, talk of Saguna Brahman does not, and cannot capture the direct perception of Brahman in deep meditation, isn't the teaching about Saguna Brahman in the *Upanishads* necessarily irrelevant to the pursuit of Brahman?
- I want you to watch a clip from *The Matrix*. It begins with Neo (played by Keanu Reeves) receiving a rather patchy historical account of the time period in which he finds himself from Morpheus (played by Laurence Fishburne) and ends with Neo puking on the deck of the Nebuchadnezzar.

A clip from *The Matrix*

- What I'm not trying to do with this clip: (1) I am not suggesting that *The Matrix* is presenting you with a Hindu view of Reality. (2) Nor am I suggesting that the 'real world' of *The Matrix* is analogous to *Brahman*.
- What I am drawing your attention to: (1) In greater society we can find readily understood distinctions being made between how the world appears to be and how it really is. (2) This distinction is based upon the following elements - (i) There is a mind-independent Reality (a Reality that's existence does not depend on being perceived), (ii) there are perceivers or subjects of experience, (iii) there is experience, and (iv) what these perceivers or subjects know about the mind-independent world is mediated through their experience.

A clip from *The Matrix*

- Philosophically, then, we need to distinguish three elements when talking or making knowledge claims about the world (or greater reality): (i) The Reality in itself, (ii) our experience of this reality through our sense faculties, and (iii) and our best understanding of Reality as gleaned from our experience.

A clip from *The Matrix*

- When doing Metaphysics we, as philosophers, concern ourselves primarily with (i). But we do this with the caveat that our understanding of Reality could, even if only as a remote possibility, be profoundly problematic.
- After all, our sense faculties may be unable to adequately represent our environment to the degree necessary to make literally true claims about Reality.
- What's more, our understanding of Reality, as gleaned from our experience, may be open to the distorting effects of bias and prejudice on our part.

A clip from *The Matrix*

- We have then a mind-independent Reality of which we want to make claims, but we are limited to our experience (which, to the best of our knowledge, is a product of something other than us somehow impacting or otherwise effecting our bodies).
- On the whole, this does not mean we give up doing metaphysics. Nevertheless we must recognize the difficulties of talking about, or gaining knowledge about, that which lies beyond experience through experience.

- Our understanding of the relationship between Reality and experience relevantly resembles the Upanishadic teachings about *Saguna Brahman* in at least one way. The Upanishadic philosophers see *Brahman* manifest in mundane experience in much the same way that we, in Western philosophy, see a mind-independent Reality manifesting itself in mundane experience.
- Our experience is not the mind-independent reality, *per se*, but it is the result of its presence around us. Yet we often point to various objects and events in our experience and understand them to be very much like the events or objects in Reality.
- This is not unlike how Upanishadic philosophers seem to be understanding the relationship of *Saguna* and *Nirguna Brahman*.

Upanishads – Atman

- Where we left off:
- (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.

Upanishads – Atman

- The Upanishadic philosophers now take this a few steps further (i.e. they now take us further than our common discourse on the self).
- (1) The Upanishadic philosophers believe that even in deep states of sleep we are in some sense conscious (a “silent consciousness” [*Course Pack*, p.1]).
- Perhaps you can think of this in this way. We do seem to be aware at some level of things happening around us. Even in deep sleep we can awaken if there is an unexpected noise in the house, or immediate vicinity. We *might*, in such a circumstance, be tempted to posit a subtle level of conscious awareness to explain this ‘readiness’ on our part.

Upanishads – Atman

- (2) The Upanishadic philosophers also hold that the self in a state of deep sleep is not our *ultimate*, or perhaps *fundamental*, self. After all, the self, *as we commonly think of it*, is responsible for all the states we have just mentioned, and so is not reducible to any one of these common states of being.
- (3) For Upanishadic philosophers the self, fundamentally, is a subject (of experience). That is to say, we are all *essentially* experiencers. When searching for our self in itself, then, we will be searching for pure subjectivity (or, perhaps, pure receptivity for experience), abstracted away from any context of experience (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.23-24).

Upanishads – Atman

- This is what inclines the Upanishadic philosophers to search for our fundamental self through meditation. Through meditation we can discipline ourselves to move beyond mundane experience (or experience that arises through our interactions with the world), and slowly move towards that which is beyond or behind experience as such (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.23-25).
- Note that the quest to find the ground of inner reality is set up, by the Upanishadic philosophers, as a pursuit of That (the underlying essence of the self) which is free from evil, suffering, and mortality (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.21).
- Why?