Christopher Bartley

*An Introduction to Indian Philosophy.*
256 pages
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The thrust of the book is to counter-pose, on the one hand, the Vedāntic tradition which accepts the authority of the Vedas and encompasses the six orthodox schools of Sāmkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsa and Vedānta; against, on the other hand, the Buddhist schools. The cosmology, ontology and epistemology of both these philosophies is rigorously developed in the form of multiple debates throughout the book, but I bracket all these discussions and concentrate mainly on the notions of dharma (duties) and liberation, which according to Bartley are the central core of Indian philosophies.

There is a unifying structural theme that all Indian schools, except for the Cārvākas, share, which is that some system oriented toward moral practice needs to be in place in order to attain salvation. This is centered around the notion of dharma in the performance of rituals or meditation or yoga or some other more sophisticated practices. This creates a primacy of practical ethics concerned with the very living of day-to-day life.

The Vedāntic perspective is introduced in Chapter 1. The Vedas provide the complete anatomy of the performance and meaning of rituals. Either there was a Being at the beginning who was the cause of everything, or the universe emerged from nothing. Since nothing can emerge from nothing there must be an original cause. In the Vedas this is taken to be the self-sufficient and all encompassing Brahmā, which ends the cycle of causes. Given that it is the whole cosmos, it is also in every soul. Rituals are the medium linking individual souls to the Brahmā. The Buddhist perspective is introduced in Chapter 2. Buddhists believe in constant flux and do not accept the existence of individual souls nor of Brahmā. They replace the ontology of substances and essences with the ontology of events and processes in which the self becomes insignificant or disappears. They propose the four-fold ethical life: first, experience of suffering; second, suffering is caused by desires such as greed; third, suffering can be ended by attaining nirvāṇa, a state that ends the cycle of rebirths; and fourth, an eight-fold moral path is to be followed to eliminate suffering. This moral life replaces trying to attain salvation through rituals.

Varieties of Buddhist schools are discussed in Chapters 3 through 6. Abhidharma Buddhism claims that each dharma as a series of experiences is self-sufficient but impermanent hence antithetical to Brahmā. Nirvāṇa is seen as a positive state to be achieved through dharma. Sautrāntika Buddhism adopts radical momentariness. Nirvāṇa is seen as an absence of suffering. Ethical consequentialism and responsibility are espoused, because the self acts for the benefit of the future series of experiences that are
the constituents of a self even if it is not the same self. Madhyamaka Buddhism rejects the essences of dharma. Nāgārjuna argues that if there are essences then there cannot be change, for in order for there to be change, every entity must be devoid of any intrinsic nature. If the world has essences then there is no nirvāna, because sufferings are essences of the world and cannot be transcended.

Varieties of Vedāntic schools are presented in Chapters 7 through 14. Sāmkhya emphasizes the importance of consciousness as an ideal observer that moves the self out of the immediate world of perception and knowledge. Yoga extends the Sāmkhya method of achieving liberation by providing a rigorous system with features ranging from self-restraint and non-violence to physical postures and breath control to meditation leading to a stage of detachment that is a necessary condition for liberation. Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika argue for a sustained self that is the agent of thoughts, desires, actions. Mimāmsa concentrates on the performance of Vedic rituals as dharma, as social and religious duty. They see the function of language as a guide to human activity in accordance with dharma. The Vedas are simply prescriptive tools for rightful action. For Kumārila, the ‘I’ remains constant and performs duty for duty’s sake.

The Prabhākaras agree that the main function of words—especially of the words found in the scriptures—is to propel us into action. Later Mimāmsakas think of dharmas as eternal reality manifested in the rituals and their consequences. For Advaita Vedānta pure consciousness goes beyond all dualism including the rationalistic means-ends dualism. It goes beyond the self and is simply consciousness without objects. Śamkara believes that in order to attain pure consciousness one must denounce the world. By contrast, Maṇdana Miśra takes the more practical approach of realizing pure consciousness through meditation while staying within practical life. Śamkara’s soteriological goal is the freedom of the soul from rebirth. All Vedāntins believe that the scriptures are the only means of knowing the Brahmaṇ, and this knowledge is the necessary and sufficient condition for liberation. Some Vedāntins argue that liberation is to be achieved through the performing of the dharmas and rituals. Śamkara, however, insists that liberation cannot be attained through action because it is always there with the Brahmaṇ. Maṇdana Miśra, on the other hand, sees positive value in religious practices. The Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta of Vaishnava tradition turns fully to bhakti as a form of personal worship.

The most remarkable achievement of this book is the demonstration of how each tradition of Indian philosophy is unified under some theme, such as the ‘no self’ theory and momentariness of the Buddhists. Yet, within each tradition and each school there is a wide range of difference, so that among the Buddhists we have a range from direct realism to absolute idealism. Not only are there debates across competing schools, there are also intense debates about the nature of the cosmos, epistemology, ethics, religion and the role of rituals among different philosophers or schools within one tradition. Whether we are looking at the thematic heterogeneity of Indian philosophies or the heterogeneity of philosophical positions and theories within each one of the schools, Indian philosophy from its very origins has to be identified with schools of thought rather than with names of philosophers.
This volume contains an abundance of long passages cited from various primary source thinkers within each school. The long quotations highlight the general theme. These extensive passages demonstrate how the thinkers developed their theories in response to those of their opponents. Through the long passages Bartley paints a broad landscape of Indian philosophy. Alternative viewpoints, worldviews and theories are presented as dynamically evolving systems.

The dimensions within each school can be studied in a vertical manner in order to reveal the sophistication and depth of the development of each sub-discipline within Indian philosophy; or they can be studied horizontally by comparing the competing schools at any given point in history. Bartley suggests an integrated approach involving study both of all dimensions within each school vertically and horizontally, i.e. between or across schools.

Bartley successfully displays the diagonal relations between the horizontal and the vertical; that is, he shows how a philosopher within a particular school borrows and develops a notion from a preceding philosopher of an opposing school. For example, Śamkara (8th Century), the Advaitin, borrows the refined notion of ‘no self’ theory of the Buddhist Nāgārjuna (2nd Century), in order to come up with a minimalist notion of the self as the seat of a unified experiencing of the empirical world. However, as the central tenet of Vedāntic philosophy is the realization of the unconditioned reality of the Brahman, this self becomes relatively insignificant once the Brahman is realized and the self as the soul merges with it. This concept of the merging of the Brahman and the soul is rejected by Nāgārjuna. On the other hand, Rāmānuja (12th Century), a Viśiṣṭādvaitin, thinks of the self as embodied reality as the manifestation of the Brahman in an individual, and it has a concrete identity like the enduring self of the Naiyāyikas. The concrete self is also the subject that involves itself in devotion that is the means of attaining Brahman.

In Chapter 12 Bartley provides a paradigm of the diversity of Indian schools of philosophy even within the same perspective—in this case, the Vedānta perspective:

Chāndogya Upanisad 6.8.7 says: ‘That which is the subtle essence, that is the identity of the cosmos, that (tat) is the reality, that is the ātman, and that (tat) is what you are’ (Sa ya eso īnimaitadātmyam idam sarvam. Tat satyam. Sa ātmā. Tat tvam asi).

Advaita Vedāntins read ‘That thou art’ as an identity statement. Rāmānuja understood it as expressing the relation of inseparable dependence between body and soul, and between the soul and God. Madhva reads it as ‘You are not that’. He contrives this by ignoring the natural break between ‘ātmā’ and ‘Tat tvam asi’ so that it becomes ‘ātmātat tvam asi’ which is analysable as ‘ātmā tat tvam asi’.

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According to the rules of Sanskrit morphology, the long ṛ may indicate the coalition of an initial letter a with the letter ṛ at the end of the preceding word. The form ‘atat’ means ‘not that’. (190)

It is remarkable that three schools of Vedānta with close affinity to each other interpret the same sentence in radically different ways, and that Śamkara and Mādhva have exactly contradictory translations of the same sentence.

Bartley surveys almost every school of Indian philosophy. However, some of the discussions on ontology and philosophy of language are too sophisticated for an introductory book, but the sophistication makes it a good read for experts in Indian philosophy.

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