



Department of Philosophy

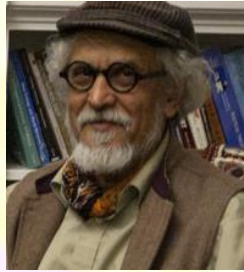
University of Delhi

Special Lecture on

Transcendental Contradictions :

The Spectre of Non-Being in Early to Middle Brāhmanic-Hindu Thought-Systems

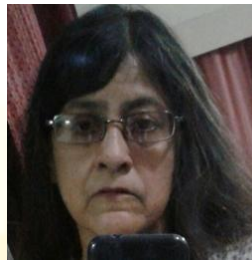
By



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Session chaired by



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Date: 12th August 2024, Monday
Time: 02:30 P.M.

Venue: Department Library

Transcendental Contradictions : The Spectre of Non-Being in Early to Middle Brāhmanic-Hindu Thought-Systems

Abstract

Like all the great traditions of philosophy, Brāhmanic-Hindu philosophy also recognised the power and (often destabilising) impact of contradictions and conflicting notions in human discourse about the ultimate, if not also in the ontic and moral worlds of human beings. However, the moot question is: how did Hindu philosophers deal with the presence and – depending on the perspective – menace or value of contradictions and incongruences when thinking about such matters? There are three parts to the chapter.

The first part will lay out instances of contradictions, paradoxes and perplexing inconsistencies detected and expressed in the early (rather ancient) poetical and, what some might call, mythical treatises that treat of philosophical or at best grand metaphysical and epistemological quandaries, in respect of cosmogony, existence and the possibility of non-existence or nothingness, the purpose and meaning of being, the seemingly a/moral order, etc.

The second part will address various ways in which prominent classical philosophers (e.g. Gauḍapāda, Śāṅkara) dealt with certain rabid contradictions and incongruences pointed out by adversaries (notably Buddhists and Sāṃkhya thinkers) between the polymorphic heterogeneity of the Vedas (hymnal and ritual) versus (or even so) the aspiring monism (in various modalities) in the Upaniṣads. The early Vedāntins proceed by establishing the unconditional unity of Brahman/ātman, hence disjuncting the projected world from all senses of the ‘the indefinite real’. The idea of ‘Being’ receives a new nuance and reinforcement (as with Plotinus further eastwards). In response to the critiques and incongruencies in their account, the Advaita [lit. non-dual] Vedānta evolved various strategies to both reject outright contradictions and paradoxes (e.g. something coming out of nothing; the contents of perceptions and inference being *mithyā* or false knowledge, the flagrant use of analogies and similes that do not work, at least in respect of the deeper ontological questions), and to save those that could be re-assigned trivalent value, or perhaps brought under dialetheism. Or Śāṅkara (8th cent), especially, passed these off with the figurative device of ‘as if’, drawing on common illusions, dreams, mirror-image, the covering cloud, and shadow-play. In this way, such apparent contradictions are re-categorised as iterations of negation (esp., double negation), emptiness (but only of phenomena), seemingly *creatio ex nihilo*, non-thinkable, ineffable (*anirvacanīya*). Last but not least, in theandric terms, conventional reality is relegated to second-order (*paravidyā*) knowing, as distinct from higher-order knowing (cf. Buddhist *paramāṛthika*, *sattā*), which alone is (of) Brahman, for ‘That One’ is the highest self-awaring Consciousness. Meanwhile the Nyāya worked up a teleo-cosmological syllogism for the existence of a Personal God (*Īśvara*; not far off the medieval Christian arguments). However, the doxastic attempt failed by their own account of contradictions, marred also by the challenge to theodicy, and Buddhists, Sāṃkhya and Vedānta critiques of their troubling theory of causation. The Nyāya did not make recourse to paraconsistent logic, while clearly the Vedānta (following the Mīmāṃsā) approach did, and thus was able to tease out, though not always convincingly, the tensions between the binaries pointed to above, especially between transcendence and the immanent other.

The last part discusses how the 11th century Vedānta stalwart, Rāmānuja, disassembling Śāṅkara’s reading of the Scriptural perspective, reformulates the *advaita* paradigm into ‘Qualified’ (*viśiṣṭa*) nondualism, where radical *difference* is theorised as a significant marker of the relation between Brahman and the phenomenal world (now viewed as Brahman’s Body) even as Brahman’s complete *identity* with *ātman* (the inner-controller, read as ‘soul’) is unconditionally and indefeasibly retained, true to the Upaniṣadic dicta. In the short finalé, I visit Madhva (13th cent.), who breaks the gordian knot of the lingering and parsimonious commitment to *difference-in-identity* dialectic (not unlike in Hegel much later) as it is found to be absurdly contrary to the testimony of the Scriptures and common experience (possibly of a growing devotional following inspired by the Bhakti movement and Rāmānuja’s Vaiṣṇava proclivity). He heralds in a decidedly dualist theology

(Dvaita), with gestures towards a monotheistically-conceived Supreme Deity: (ever-present in the Avatāra) Krishna.

About the Speaker

Prof. Purushottama Bilimoria works in Indian & Cross-Cultural Philosophy, Critical Philosophies of Law and Religion, and Intellectual Diaspora Studies. Recently, he served as a Distinguished Professor Law in O P Jindal University. He is otherwise an Associate Professorial-Principal Fellow of the University of Melbourne; a Teaching Faculty with University of San Francisco and San Francisco State University, and the Center for Dharma Studies, GTU-UC Berkeley. He is an Editor-in-Chief of Sophia (journal of philosophy & traditions, Springer), and Sophia Series in Cross-cultural Philosophy & Cultures). Recent publications include Routledge History of Indian Philosophy (with A. Rayner, 2019); Contemplative Studies and Hinduism and Contemplative Studies and Jainism (with Rita D. Sherma, C. Bohenc, 2021-23) Handbook of Indian Ethics (II); Gender Justice Bioethics & Ecology (with Amy Rayner, 2024); Engaging Philosophies of Religion: Across Global Boundaries (with G Kopf and N Loewen, Bloomsbury, 2024). He has authored over 100 articles in various scholarly genres.