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Commentary on Brown

Mary M. Garrett

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Author: Mary M. Garrett

In Response to: Richard Brown's *Varieties of argument in Indian philosophy*

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Richard Brown, in his paper on Sankara's arguments about the nature of the self, has highlighted the similarities between Sankara's position and those of certain European philosophers, especially Kant. What I would like to do here is to turn to the differences, not the differences between these particular arguments, but between the assumptions underlying Sankara's philosophical quest and the philosophical enterprise in India more generally as contrasted to that of the European tradition. These assumptions have especially significant consequences for how analyses of the self were verified and how they were used in each tradition. My aim is to complement Brown's analysis by placing it into a larger context, one that acknowledges the parallels of argumentative structure he has illuminated while also accounting for differences in the verification, use, and consequences of these arguments.

To ground the comparison, let's use David Hume's famous experiential research on the nature of the self; coincidentally, his approach and conclusions have some superficial resemblances to the Buddhist view, which influenced Sankara. In the solitude of his study, Hume turned his consciousness inward and perceived the self to be but a "bundle of sensations," lacking any deeper unity. Disturbed by the experience, he hastened to the game room, shot some billiards in company, banished the distressing thoughts from his mind, and regained his cheerful spirits completely.

From the standpoint of Indian philosophy, if Hume believed he had a genuine insight into the nature of the self, walking away from it was absolutely the wrong course. For Sankara as for most Indian philosophers the goal of philosophical investigation is moksa, spiritual liberation, and it is precisely ignorance of one's true nature that causes suffering and rebirth. An insight bearing on the fundamental concern of philosophy (and life) is not to be walked away from.

However, Hume's ruminations might not merit much serious attention on this issue, since in the Indian context realization of the nature of the self is not just a purely cognitive process. As Ninian Smart (1992, 136) puts it, the doctrines being argued over

are not merely objects of speculation, but have to be realized existentially through contemplative experience.... Consequently, when knowledge or insight is spoken of in the Indian religious tradition, it does not just mean the kind of theoretical understanding which might accrue from, say, the study of physics. Knowledge is spiritual: and it involves 'seeing' in inner experience the truth of what is taught.

But for a Vedanta philosopher such as Sankara gaining such awareness "must involve not only the prior conformity to Vedic duties, devotionism and ordinary religion, but must culminate in reflection upon the true purport of revelation... accompanied by meditation and concentration, in the manner of yoga" (Smart 1992, 94). What is involved is a somatic praxis that is exercised continuously, not merely an occasional chain of ratiocinations such as Hume engaged in.

Meditation plays a special role in this praxis. Meditation is not just thought set free to drift, but procedures for directing awareness in particular ways. Thus, for instance, within Buddhism, which is the tradition I am more familiar with, there have developed a variety of procedures for

analyzing the flow of experience, the illusion of the unified self, attachments and desires, suffering, and consciousness. What this means is that part of the assumed evidence for an argument about the nature of the self for Indian philosophy is “Try it! You’ll see!”

Of course, the meditative exercises for each school are intimately bound up with and devolve from their particular theoretical presuppositions about the self, experience, consciousness, and so on. Nevertheless, such an existential realization of the truth of one’s doctrine surely functions as powerful evidence for those already on that path.

Finally, since the realization of the truth in this manner brings liberation, an end to suffering in this life and an end to further suffering through rebirth, certain kinds of argument ad hominem would seem to be not fallacious, but appropriate when applied to those who claim to have reached this state. Hence, perhaps, the Chan Buddhist custom of asking the dying master for some last words, and the collections of such final utterances, usually along the lines of “The clouds floating above; life is but a dream.” Hence, perhaps, the consternation of one group of disciples when their master’s last words were, “I really don’t want to die!”

References

Smart, Ninian. 1992. *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy*. 2nd rev. ed. NY: E.J. Brill.