

Part I

Philosophical Issues in the Religions of the World

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Hinduism

JONARDON GANERI

It is by now commonplace to observe that “Hinduism” is a term of comparatively recent provenance, an outsider’s designation of forms of religiosity happening to belong to a particular geographical region. It has rightly been said that it serves at best as “an acceptable abbreviation for a family of culturally similar traditions” (Lipner 1994, p. 6), that it is a sort of catchall for what is “in truth a group of religions which have much in common between them, but in which there are also many differences and contrasts” (Hacker 2006, p. 479). Minimally, the term has been used to designate those non-Buddhist, non-Jaina, non-Muslim, and non-Sikh forms of religious life in the Indian sub-continent which have in some (often rather loose) sense drawn inspiration from these groups of texts: the Vedas (prescriptions of a variety of types of ritual practice) and associated work on ritual theory; the books about social duty and political obligation of Manu and other works that pertain to the concept of dharma “duty”; the two epic stories, the Mahābhārata, of which the Bhagavadgītā – Karna’s advice to Arjuna on the eve of battle – is a part, and the Rāmāyana, the story of Rāma; and the Upanisads (“hidden teachings” about the self) and the commentaries on them. Many other texts are of equal centrality for one or another group. Attempts to provide a more substantive characterization of Hinduism have always been associated with attempts to impose one or another political conception of India, or to superimpose on it a philosophical ideology, and for that reason I think that the only wise course is to retain maximal flexibility and caution. My aim in this chapter is to examine key issues philosophers within one or another Hindu tradition have taken to be the central problems in the philosophy of religion. I will also try to use this approach to show that the discipline of “philosophy of religion” must work toward a self-understanding that does not impose European paradigms on non-European approaches to religion or philosophy. The fact that almost no “Hindu” doctrine goes unquestioned or unchallenged by another “Hindu” shows that the emphasis must be on the dynamics of philosophical dialogue with the tradition, rather than the defense of certain propositions. There are Hindus who deny the existence of God, and there are Hindus who deny that there is life after death; the real focus of interest therefore is on the nature of internal ways of challenging, affirming, re-evaluating, and redescribing what are taken to be the fundamental philosophical issues.

The Vedas are taken by the philosophers of classical India to consist essentially in an eternal, authorless body of ritual imperatives of the general schematic form “One who desires heaven ought to perform the agnihotra sacrifice.” Of course, the prescription of ritual performance is but one part of this complex corpus of texts, the earliest of which, the RgVeda, dates back to many centuries BCE (dating the texts with any degree of accuracy is, unfortunately, extremely problematic). A school studying the philosophical basis of Vedic ritual theory came into being; its foundational text is the Mīmāṃsā-sūtra, the term “mīmāṃsā” implying “examination with reasons.” The best-known of the Mīmāṃsā intellectuals are Śābara (c. 400 CE) and Kumārila (c. 650 CE). Mīmāṃsā represents, we might note, a strand of atheism within Hinduism; other Hindus believe there is a single cosmic principle, called *brahman*. And in popular expressions of religion there are, of course, many gods that provide the immediate objects of devotion. The fact that there are atheist as well as monotheist and polytheist Hindus ought to be enough of a warning about selecting some one strand of thought within Hinduism and claiming that it is “central.”

There are, indeed, as many concepts of reason in India as there are calendars. An important contrast within orthodox Hinduism is reflected in the use of the terms *hetu*, “evidence-based rationality,” and *tarka*, “hypothesis-based rationality.” Part of the Hindu canon is made up of a variety of “lawbooks” about *dharma* – moral, social, and religious duty, including duties specific to the “stations” of life. These lawbooks are collectively known as the *dharmaśāstra*, and they are also said to be *smṛti*, “what is remembered,” in contrast with the Veda, which is called *śruti*, “what is heard.” The *Manu-smṛti* – the lawbook of Manu – is the most important and popular of such texts. It was composed in the second to third century CE (see Olivelle 2005, p. 25). Manu is disappointingly unequivocal in his criticism of the unconstrained use of evidence-based reason (Manu 2.10–11), but he is considerably more willing to allow the use of hypothesis-based rationality (Manu 12.106). A careful examination of the resources of such embedded rationality reveals that there is an underlying model of considerable flexibility and power. This model of rationality is based on two sorts of principles: (1) principles for the selection of paradigmatic cases or exemplars, and (2) principles for the mapping of truths about the paradigms onto truths about other cases, based on rules of adaptation and substitution. One might imagine the way one reasons when trying to change the battery of a new car, a process that involves remembering the procedure that worked on the old car and adapting it to fit the layout and design of the new one. Clearly this “blueprint + adaptation” model is situational and particularist. I believe that it came to serve as the basis of a general theory of moral reasoning, leaving behind its origins in the hermeneutics of ritual (see Ganeri 2004).

If we do use the term “Hinduism,” we must, as I have said, surrender the expectation of being able to describe anything as the “essence” of the contribution of Hinduism to the philosophy of religion, or the belief that it is likely that we shall be able to uncover substantive generalizations that are both true and interesting. Wittgenstein (to whom the idea of such family-resemblance designation is due), in lecture notes from 1930–33, gave voice to a more fundamental difficulty that needs to be addressed in the comparative philosophical study of religions: that although each of the members of the family may use a common vocabulary of religious terms, their usages might be, in his phrase, “grammatically incomparable.” Thus,

About “God” his [Wittgenstein’s] main point seemed to be that this word is used in many grammatically different senses. He said, for instance, that many controversies about God could be settled by saying “I’m not using the word in such a sense that you can say ...,” and that different religions “treat things as making sense which others treat as nonsense, and don’t merely deny some proposition which another religion affirms”; and he illustrated this by saying that if people use “God” to mean something like a human being, then “God has four arms” and “God has two arms” will both have sense, but that others so use “God” that “God has arms” is nonsense – would say “God can’t have arms.” ... To explain what he meant by “grammatically” different senses, he said we wanted terms which are not “comparable” ... but which differ as, e.g., “chair” differs from “permission to sit on a chair,” or “railway” from “railway accident.” (Moore 1955, pp. 16–17)

It makes little sense to ask when the railway occurred, although it does make sense to ask when the railway accident took place, because these two terms have, in Wittgenstein’s special sense of the expression, different “grammars,” delimitations of what is properly sayable. It is perhaps the case that the controversies between Buddhism and Hinduism over *karman*, moral “action,” and *ātman*, “self,” are incomparable in just this manner, the apparently metaphysical claim that *ātman* can’t be a substance being translatable, following Wittgenstein’s proposal, into the higher-order claim that “*ātman* is a substance” does not say anything, given the Buddhist use of the term. The lesson I shall draw for the purposes of this chapter, however, is that we should not take the conceptual apparatus and vocabulary of the discipline of philosophy of religion as somehow antecedently given, and so already available to shape our discussion of Hinduism’s contribution. Rather, we should ask, of some given Hindu thinker or group of thinkers, how we are to understand the philosophical questions made salient to them by their religious dispositions and outlooks. The familiar, given categories in the philosophy of religion can seem to provide a Procrustean bed for discussion, but in fact need to adapt themselves to the particular, so that a theoretical framework emerges in response to the specificities of the case in hand.

It is important to understand how embedded resources of reason can make internal dissent possible. This is especially the case with respect to the broad family of culturally similar traditions that is Hinduism, for Hinduism has often been regarded by its opponents as intolerant of dissent and by its proponents as speaking with a single voice. As the Mīmāṃsā philosophers I referred to above make clear, the models of reason that are embedded within Hinduism make possible the existence of dissent and disagreement, for different decisions about what counts as an appropriate adaptation, and also what counts as a relevant paradigm, can always be advanced and defended (cf. the dialecticians’ concept of *jāti*, reasoning about appropriate and inappropriate resemblance). As a resource to be drawn upon in reasoning about one’s choices, the model is a highly versatile one. In this chapter I concentrate on one of the many skeptical voices *within* Hinduism, one that challenges the moral authority of the Vedas on rational grounds. The argument appeals to broad principles of rational interpretation: the Vedas, it is said, are verifiably mistaken, internally inconsistent, and pointlessly repetitious. As speech-acts, the argument continues, they resemble the delusional ramblings of a drunkard; they carry no epistemological authority. An uncharitable view of religious tolerance might lead one to expect this skepticism to be met with censure and condemnation, but in fact it is joined in argument and used to press for a

deeper understanding of the philosophical foundations. Other principles of rational interpretation that resolve the inconsistencies and explain the repetitions are advanced, and a justification of the assent-worthiness of the Vedic pronouncements is sought in a general epistemology of testimony. Such examination might also shed light on the relationship between the *smṛti* and the *śruti*, which is fundamental to Hinduism's conception of itself as a religion in some way *based on* the Vedas. For it is in the *smṛti*, the codified tradition of religious instruction, rather than the *śruti*, the "revealed" word describing by-and-large arcane ritual practices, that the actual duties of Hindus are described.

For at least one such group, the fundamental philosophical question about religion is the following: given that the statements of the Vedic corpus – whether they be heard or read – deserve credence, what is the rational foundation of that assent-worthiness? In virtue of what does the Veda belong within the space of reason? This is the problem examined in the discussion under Nyāya-sūtra 2.1.57–68. A skeptical opponent is made to voice the problem: "They [the Vedas] cannot command assent, because they suffer from the following epistemological defects: falsity, inconsistency, and repetition" (NS 2.1.57: *tad-aprāmānyam anṛta-vyāghāta-punarukta-dosebhaḥ*).

It is, one should note, far from atypical of a Hindu text for dialectical space to be given for skeptical, dissenting voices, for the critical stance to be taken seriously, and for detailed argument and counter-argument to ensue. The most famous, though by no means most philosophical, example is Rgveda 10.129: "Whence this creation has arisen – perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the One who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only He knows – or perhaps He does not know." Nyāyasūtra 2.1.57 articulates a fundamental skeptical worry about the entire legitimacy and epistemic value of the Vedas themselves, perhaps the voice of some actual doubter, perhaps only a hypothetical one (that is to say, a *pūrvapakṣa*). It is, as we will see, through reason alone that such voices are sought to be answered.

What, first of all, does the term "falsity" signify in the skeptical challenge? Remembering that the canonical form of a Vedic statement is the hypothetical imperative – "One who desires result X should perform action Y" – "falsity" here consists in the observed performance of the prescribed action Y with the observed non-occurrence of the declared result X. The Vedas lend themselves to empirical disconfirmation because they frequently make claims about the observable results of ordinary actions, for example, prescribing a certain rite for someone who wants a child. Might one attempt to avoid the risk of empirical disconfirmation by restricting Vedic assent-worthiness to those hypotheticals that prescribe trans-empirical results? Vātsyāyana, one of the commentators on the Nyāya-sūtra, foresees this move, and answers on behalf of the skeptic that the observable "falsity" of the Vedas in some cases discredits them in all (NBh 90, 13–16). Trust is undermined by infectious evidence of unreliability. For that reason, the claim of the Maitrāyana Upaniṣad, "One who desires heaven should perform the agnihotra" (Mai Up. 6.36), is also, in an extended sense of the term, false, not because the alleged result observably fails to occur, but because the claim belongs within a class upon all of whose members suspicion has fallen.

The defect named "inconsistency" covers a pair of cases. First, there is the case where one text seems to command a certain act, but another text seems to condemn the performance of that same act. Thus, "After sunrise, perform the sacrifice," but also "The

sacrifice performed after sunrise goes to the dogs.” Second, there are cases where a single act is commanded in both texts, but the attendant specifications of circumstances are incompatible. Thus, “After sunrise, perform the sacrifice” and “Before sunrise, perform the sacrifice.” Uddyotakara, another commentator, points out that the mutual incompatibility might be thought in terms of the injunctions conjunctively implying that there is no time at which the sacrifice is enjoined to be performed (NV 251, 16–19). Finally, the defect of repetition is exemplified by cases in which the same thing is said over and over again, redundantly, which Vātsyāyana (on behalf of the skeptic) likens to the speech of a drunkard (*pramatta-vākya*; NBh 91, 8)!

These three defects are really three different ways in which the religious canon fails to be compatible with reason: by being empirically falsified, and so incompatible with observable fact; by being internally inconsistent, and so incompatible with logic; and by being rambling and repetitious, incompatible with pragmatic constraints on coherence. Turning the argument around, we can say that those defects constitute at least a necessary condition for assent-worthiness in discourse: a body of discourse commands our assent only if the discourse is consistent with the known facts, internally coherent, and subject to pragmatic constraints on intelligibility. Any discourse should “make sense” along these three dimensions if it is to deserve our credence.

We have seen how the skeptical challenge is formulated. Nyāya philosophers seek a reasoned response, one that speaks to the three sorts of epistemic defect that allegedly undermine the traditional authority of the Vedas. It is, first of all, not the case that some Vedic declarations are falsified by observation, for in any case in which the prescribed result does not occur, this can be accounted for by “imperfections” in the performance of the prescribed act. Specifically, the imperfection might lie with the actual conduct of the act, with the methods and materials used, or with the mental state of the performer (*karma-kartr-sādhana-vaiguṇāt*; NS 2.1.58). The everyday application of practical reason again provides the model. Vātsyāyana gives as an illustration the following humdrum means-end rule: “Someone who desires fire should rub together pieces of wood.” Someone’s inability to so produce fire does nothing to falsify this maxim, but merely demonstrates that something has gone wrong in its execution. The Nyāya discussion here is highly reminiscent of Austin’s account of “performative misfires” (Austin 1975), a theory that has indeed been applied to ritual practice (Tambiah 1979). One might worry that the strategy of appealing to performative misfires will also save the most obviously fallacious of practical maxims and render even magical rites immune to observational disconfirmation. The correct response to this claim is that the purpose of invoking this strategy is only to show that the objection that Vedic scripture is untrustworthy (because it is empirically false) rests on an unestablished premise; its purpose is not to demonstrate the actual assent-worthiness of any given maxim, mundane or scriptural.

Apparent inconsistencies can always be eliminated by further relativizing the statements. In our example, the Nyāya philosopher suggests that the performance of a sacrifice after sunrise is decreed only for someone who has already resolved to perform it before sunrise, and so on (NS 2.1.59). Another technique is to argue that there is no genuine incompatibility, that is to say, no example where the very same act is both prescribed and prohibited, under exactly the same conditions and circumstances. Again, repetition is only a fault if it serves no purpose, and an important distinction is

drawn between the uselessly repetitive (*abhyāsa*) and the pragmatically useful repetition (*anuvāda*; NS 2.1.60). In other words, there are pragmatic conversational functions that can be achieved through speech-acts of repetition; it is not always the equivalent of drunken rambling. For example, there is a clear utility in repeatedly urging someone to go faster (NS 2.1.67).

Skepticism about the Vedas' epistemological credentials was grounded in the application to them of a discursive analysis appropriate to ordinary speech and communication. In its place, the Nyāya-sūtra, borrowing from Mīmāṃsā hermeneutical theory, provides a systematization of Vedic discourse in terms of three functional categories: imperative (*vidhi*), explanatory scholium (*arthavāda*), and pragmatically valuable repetition (*anuvāda*) (NS 2.1.62). Couching the Vedas in an analytical framework that preserves their discursive autonomy does nothing, however, to attest to their assent-worthiness. As Vātsyāyana clearly states, "undermining the critical refutation is not itself sufficient to demonstrate the assent-worthiness of religious language" (*kim punah pratishedhahetūddhārād eva śabdasya pramānatvam siddhyati? na*; NBh 96, 11). Further argumentation is needed.

What we might think of as the most obvious argument, namely that the statements in the religious canon are assent-worthy because they are in origin the revealed word of a non-deceptive divinity, is striking by its absence in the texts I am considering. Indeed, the dialectic at this point moves between two Hindu schools, one of which, Nyāya, locates all assent-worthiness in the epistemic credentials of the speaker, while the other, Mīmāṃsā, attempts to derive Vedic assent-worthiness from the alleged "eternality" of the Vedic texts. Mīmāṃsā philosophers claim that the allegedly impeccable epistemic credentials of Vedic pronouncements could not be secured if they had an origin, for nothing that has the nature of a composed work is intrinsically immune to error. Nyāya philosophers, on the other hand, claim that that religious epistemology of testimony is continuous with other branches of testimonially transmitted knowledge and that the epistemic credentials of Vedic discourse must be accounted for by appeal to the same rational principles that apply in other areas. We might indeed suspect that in this dialectic the term "assent-worthiness" (*prāmānya*) is being used with different grammars. A Naiyāyika might want to claim that it makes no sense to say that Vedic assertions are eternal, in the way we do say that atoms are eternal or space is eternal. Certainly, they do not regard it as obligatory to demonstrate that the Vedas are intrinsically immune to error. Rather, the Vedas fall within the space of reason precisely because or insofar as one can intelligibly regard their claim to our assent as an instance of the general phenomenon of assent-worthiness in speech.

So Nyāya-sūtra 2.1.68: "Just as with the [contrasting?] assent-worthiness of medical treatises and of mantras, the assent-worthiness of this [the Veda] is a function of the credibility of the testifier." This is not meant to provide a definition of textual assent-worthiness, but rather a criterion for it. According to the commentators, a statement is assent-worthy if and only if it is true, and testifiers command our assent if they are sincere, benevolent, and have a "direct knowledge" of things (*sākṣātkṛtadharmatā*). In other words, the following is proposed as a *sui generis* epistemic norm in the ethics of belief: One should give one's assent to the assertions of a well-motivated expert. Applying this general principle to the Vedas, what it states is that one should assent to the declarations of those seers, prophets, and wise men who are particularly insightful in

the matters with which the Vedas are concerned and who are benevolent in their dealings with others. A later Naiyāyika, Vācaspati, will, to be sure, import a theological dimension to this discussion and identify the credible testifier with God; even then, it is not God's peculiar authority that explains the rationality of religious belief, but rather the derivation of religious epistemology from more general epistemic principles. Nothing in the above argument by itself implies that there has to be a single, ultimate, Vedic expert, any more than there needs to be, in medicine, a unique ultimate source of medical expertise. As in any branch of knowledge, expertise is distributed and skills are pooled.

The larger issue here has to do with the implied conception of the relationship between religion and reason. In framing the terms of the debate about scriptural authority as they have, the Nyāya philosophers have also, it might appear, sided with those who think that religion can and must be made subject to reason, and against those who see religion and reason as belonging to logically distinct domains of human endeavor. In Europe, the early Enlightenment separation of philosophy and theology took the form of a commitment to the second of these positions. Spinoza, for example, argued that what he called the "fundamental principle of theology," namely that "men are saved by obedience alone," can neither be proved nor refuted by the use of reason (1670, p. 191), and he criticized both those who think that "Scripture must be adapted to reason" (p. 186), the first of whom, he claimed, was Maimonides, as well as those who, still failing to separate philosophy from theology, believe that "reason should be a servant of Scripture" (p. 186). Of such people, Spinoza asks, "What altar of refuge can a man find for himself when he commits treason against the majesty of reason?" (p. 194). Among the various members of the Hindu group, a lively debate occurs about the relative epistemological priority of reason and scripture, some espousing subordination, others adaptation, but few seeking the total separation of which Spinoza speaks. Early modern Nyāya, however, does move toward a position resembling European deism, admitting rational proofs for the existence of a supreme being (*īśvara*) but diminishing the role of "revealed" religion (see Vattanky 1984).

I have discussed the analysis by certain Hindu philosophers of scriptural veracity (*śabdapramāṇya*) and the relation between an appeal to scripture and the use of reason. A fuller discussion would certainly need to examine the work of other members of the Hindu family: early and later Sāṃkhya, the Yoga-sūtra of Patañjali, Advaita Vedānta and Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, controversies within Mīmāṃsā, *bhakti*, the Upanisads, the theoretical outlook of the epic Mahābhārata and Rāmāyana, the later Nyāya theistic proofs, and the role of *adrsta* in Vaiśeṣika, to name but a few.

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