

DANAM CONFERENCE 2007

SESSION DKM2

Theme: The Ethics of Dharma

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ABSTRACTS

Purushottama Bilimoria, Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia)

Is Dharma Rational? And Karma Intelligible? Is Moksha (a) Way Out? Critique of Mohanty, Matilal, Daya Krishna.

A question or conundrum persistently arises in Indian philosophy, not in the context of discussing erstwhile metaphysics, epistemology, or even logic, but in the dialogue over moral philosophy: “Has there ever been ‘ethics’ in India?” “Can one meaningfully speak of ‘Indian ethics’?” “Isn’t the idea of ‘ethics’ itself a Western invention - like anthropology?” Others may ask: Is there a formal discipline within Indian thought that has an ‘internally consistent rational system in which patterns of human conduct are justified with reference to ultimate norms and values?’ Or, alternatively, it will be questioned whether the Indian preoccupation with mysticism, and its supposedly ‘life-denying’ theology, rules out altogether the condition for the possibility of ethics, suggesting that morality in India is so inextricably founded on religious belief and imperatives, that there can be no space for a rationally grounded ethical tradition. Perhaps too, its excessive concern with metaphysics might be thought to deflect away from the proper work of moral philosophical thinking, as indeed of reason and emotion.

The late Bimal Krishna Matilal articulated the conundrum rather perspicuously. One part of the paper examines Matilal’s exposition on the exemplary moral dilemmas presented in narrative literature, particularly in the epic Mahabharata, and suggestion that there was always a rational solution around the corner or possibly missed, even by Krishna. The epics embed and exemplify a myriad of moral issues which are thought through rationally; but the epics no more than the tradition at large, quite succeeded in articulating a *sui generis* thesis that we would call ‘ethics’ or ‘morality’, without the cultural, theological and historical overtones and baggage. Clearly, Matilal was looking for an exemplary rationality as the basis of ethical thinking: no less in India as he took it widely to be the case in the West. That he might have overestimated the rational platform or promises of Western moral discourse, never quite occurred to him; that ethics treats of more than moral dilemmas was also another oversight; and that what he draws from the bows of the epics as moral ‘dilemmas’ are really not dilemmas as understood generally moral philosophy, etc., undermines the very analysis and counter-thesis he seeks to present.

The second part of the paper moves to examine a slightly different, albeit still heavily theoretical, approach taken by Prof J. N. Mohanty. Like Matilal, Mohanty is also concerned with addressing some of the fundamental questions of ethics, anywhere, looking to see how the tradition of these texts and culture deal with them; and he turns to dharma, karma, and moksha for his critical forays. Mohanty looks for theory, if theory there be, across Indian

moral philosophy. Though with not quite the same rationalism of Matilal, Mohanty nonetheless finds a strong role played by Reason à la Hindu Sittlichkeit in the unity of dharma-karma, and freedom, in Indian ethics.

The third part of the paper examines Daya Krishna's hair-raising questions and variant readings on the dharma, and moksha, and the (un)intelligibility of karma, in the context of what he calls the 'myth of *purusharathas*.' Whither, then, the rational foundations of Indian moral philosophy?

Joseph Prabhu, Cal. State University, Los Angeles
Dharma through Thick and Thin.

Clifford Geertz, the late American anthropologist, came up with the contrast between "thick" and "thin" description. The former refers to specific, context-bound, rule-governed accounts, while the latter points to more abstract, context-transcendent and polysemic ones. This distinction has proved very useful in ethics and in accounts of ethical virtues and practices.

I want to apply this distinction to the history of the idea of "dharma." Some scholars have criticized it for its vagueness ("thinness"). I, by contrast, want to argue that its thinness has actually been a conceptual and semantic strength. The notion of /dharma/ has provided a horizon, a /gestalt/ under which more specific ethical ideas and practices have been spawned.

Shyam Ranganathan, York University
How to Generalize and How not to Generalize about "Dharma", "Karma" and "Moksa"

The question of the content and rationality of various concepts in the Indian tradition of philosophical importance cannot be answered in a principled manner without addressing certain fundamental questions in translation theory. In this paper I set out a solution to problems of translational determinacy that makes use of the notion of a "text-type" in the translation studies literature. On the basis of this account, it follows that to translate normative discourse is to translate philosophical discourse, and thus the question of the meaning of terms such as "dharma," and "mokṣa" is converted from a linguistic question, about the semantics of these terms in Sanskrit, to a textual question, of how these terms function to structure philosophical texts. I argue in light of these considerations, we can understand "dharma" and "mokṣa" (but not "karma") as what I have called "key philosophical terms" that serve the purpose of articulating universal and general theories (i.e. philosophical theories) differentiated by axiological criteria in light of certain considerations that authors deem relevant. Viewed in this manner, "dharma" can be shown to have the same textual function as the terms "ethics" or "moral," and moreover, "dharma" and "mokṣa" are *ex hypothesi* rational. However, no cross-philosophical generalizations can be made about the content of these terms without reference to the philosophical particulars of the texts they are in and the *darśana*-s they articulate. In light of this analysis, some interesting divergences across *darśana*-s in a variety of Indic traditions will be examined. The various conceptions of the extension of

“dharma” also betray interesting similarities and differences, as does the various conceptions of the extension of “mokṣa.”

Christopher Key Chapple, Loyola Marymount University
Dharma, Karma, and Moksha in Jaina Tradition

Dharma, karma, and moksha in Jaina tradition configures differently on some points in comparison with Buddhism and Brahmanical traditions. Dharma, while referring at times in the general sense of religious or lawful behavior, also serves as a technical category in Jaina philosophy associated with the process of movement. Karma similarly holds a special technical meaning in Jainism, referring not to deferred results of prior action but to physical particles that accrue to obscure the true nature of the soul (*jiva*). Liberation (*moksha*) similarly takes on a physical aspect, with great detail given to the status and shape of one's body after the final ascent to the 14th and final level of spiritual attainment (*gunasthana*). These teachings highlight the particular (and different) nature of Jaina cosmology and ethics.

Guy Petterson, University of Melbourne, Australia
Salvation through Deeds?: Madeleine Biardeau's "Anthropology of Desire"

The French Indologist Madeleine Biardeau mapped out a so-called 'Anthropology of Desire' in her book *Hinduism: The Anthropology of a Civilization*. This paper will examine Biardeau's treatment of the role of desire (*kama*) in theory of action of the philosophical schools of Nyaya and Mimamsa and some problematic aspects of her characterization of dharma as an instrument of brahmanic ideology. Her emphasis on the overlapping nature of the four purusharthas suggests that her work has implications for the discussion of dharma and moksha, as well as the underlying motivations of karma and kama. The sense of the paradoxical notion of a 'salvation through deeds' will also be considered.