University of Dayton Review

Volume 9
Number 2 *Fall*

Article 6

September 1972

Action in Indian Philosophy

H. James Nersoyan
University of Dayton

Action in Indian Philosophy

H. James Nersoyan

Recently a philosopher writing a new exegesis of the *Tractatus* in the *Journal of Philosophy* presented as his justification for writing yet another piece on Wittgenstein the quip that rubbish is rubbish but the history of rubbish is scholarship![1] I present what I hope is a contribution to the concept of action in Indian philosophy roughly in the same spirit. W. D. Hart, the author of the article I refer to, did not mean of course that the philosophy of Wittgenstein is rubbish; neither do I mean that Indian philosophy is rubbish. It most certainly is not. What is meant is that it is possible to present a point of view sympathetically without wholly committing oneself to it, and this is what I propose to do.

When we contrast the phrase 'Indian philosophy' to a phrase like 'Indian mathematics,' we may become sensitive to the fact that the phrase 'Indian mathematics' sounds odd in a way in which 'Indian philosophy' does not. There is a certain parochialism to philosophy which is why it admits of an adjective indicating geographic area or culture, and which is one reason why someone else's philosophy sometimes simply does not *taste* good. Yet we must be able to distinguish between taste and, say, nutritive value.

What gives Indian philosophy its local flavor? It is certainly not insights that the West never had. It is rather certain emphases and a peculiar terminology. Three such emphases are related to the theory of action: the first is that the world is an illusion, although dissent from this proposition is not uncommon in Indian philosophical literature. The second emphasis, to be pointed out with the same reservation, is that atman is Brahman. The term *atman* like the Greek *psyche* or the Hebrew *ruach* originally meant breath. The term "self" appears to be an adequate translation of atman. As to Brahman, it is a term to whose referent would apply such Western terms or phrases as Fichte's Absolute Ego, Hegel's Idea, Spencer's Unknowable, Tillich's Ground, Jaspers' Encompassing, but the list cannot be completed. The atman, then, is Brahman. The third of the emphases I have in mind which is related to the Indian theory of action is the very characteristic world-view that to live in the world is to endure pain or, more generally, to suffer.

Let me make some brief comments on the first two of these emphases; some clarification will be brought to the third emphasis as I proceed. The texts on which I will rely for these comments will be the Upanishads, the Samkhya-Yoga and the Vedanta as interpreted largely by Samkara.

To begin with the view that the world is an illusion.

The Sanskrit term *maya* is rather well known in English-speaking circles and

often rendered as illusion. It goes without saying that one must not be misled by the term illusion. Any unreality attributed to the phenomenal world in the advaita Vendanta system is no excuse for treating the world as if it were a vast, variegated mirage. In a world which is unreal in the sense of the Vedanta, such terms as solid, painful and the like do not lose their relevance.

In the philosophical Vedantic tradition the concept of maya is appealed to by way of specifying the relation between the transcendent Brahman, infinite, immutable, eternal and subject to no attributes, and the phenomenal world where Brahman is nevertheless present, and for which it is responsible in some way. This fact which the seer intuitively knows to be the case does not lend itself to a description which is logically satisfactory. The best one can do in the circumstances is to say that the Absolute has a power, namely maya, whereby it turns itself partially into the world of space and time. By a further extension maya comes to mean the world itself.

Bhagavat is a Vedic deity. In what he says of himself one sees the metaphysics of maya taking shape: "In the beginning I alone existed in and by myself and there was nothing other than myself, whether in a manifested or unmanifested form. After the creation of diversities also I alone exist—because all these are my self-manifestations and nothing has existence independent and separate from mine.—After the destruction of all these diversities also I alone will exist—because all my temporal self-manifestations will be dissolved in time in me."[2]

It should not be difficult to present objections to Bhagavat's claim. We may say, for instance, that language is modelled after phenomena and that it cannot therefore give us any information about anything behind phenomena. There is a certain use of language in the Upanishads which seems to be designed to circumvent this objection. This use consists in the flagrant violation, again and again, of the most elementary laws of logic. Examples are: "This verily is that," or "it moves. It moves not. It is far, and it is near. It is within all this, and it is outside all this." Such contradictions appear to be designed to make language do what it cannot do otherwise, namely, let us have a peek into a reality which it may be veiling. As the two elements of the opposition cancel each other out, the ensuing silence is the opening to the Being behind or at the root of maya. In this sense, or from this perspective Brahman is not to be described but to be realized. In the Kena Upanisad we read: "Brahman is known when it is realized in every state of mind."

I suggest that rather than "illusory" we could translate *maya* taken as an adjective as "mythic," in the sense that a myth is to the meaning it simultaneously hides and reveals as the world is to Brahman. A myth is true and valuable if you know how to read it and read between the lines. It is false and worthless otherwise. So is the world. Anyone who knows how to read or "demythicize" the world will realize Brahman. Others are kept in *avidya* or ignorance. This is, I believe, what is chiefly meant by the characteristically Indian statement that the world is maya. The world is maya also because it is in time, perishable, while Brahman and non-being are altogether irreconcilable.

The atman-Brahman identity which was the second Indian emphasis I men-

tioned above and to which I now turn very briefly is related to this last observation.

In the real-unreal maya world, selves occupy a privileged position. A homely simile may convey the point. Consider a pail of water drawn out of a well. Let the pail represent limitations of space and time; the water in the pail the phenomenal self, the I of Descartes' Cogito. But a mere turning of the attention to the matter will reveal that the *real* self in a certain sense of the word "real," is the water in the well of which the water in the pail is held up for inspection. Or consider the infinite regress, I am Peter, I know that I am Peter, I know that I know that I am Peter, etc. That which, in this regress, *yields* the infinite series of the successive I's is the Brahman, and it is a most general Indian claim that this sort of depth cannot be found, or perhaps built, into anything material. It is in this sense, if I understand it correctly, that atman is Brahman or the self is the Self. For the sake of convenience I write the first half (atman) with a small s and the second Self (Brahman) with a large S, but even that is not necessary. Atman and Brahman are identical.

It is against these two cardinal notions of the world being maya and of the atman-Brahman identity, along with the notion that to live is to suffer, that action must be looked at in Indian philosophy. The kind of action with which the Indian theories originally dealt is sacrificial action, or religious ritual. Ever since, Indian metaphysics has been intensely practical in the sense that it was aimed at the realization of Brahman and never at the solution of metaphysical problems as such. Knowledge meant a mental-spiritual state informed by the realization of Brahman. Action which was a thing of time could, if properly performed, cause one to be translated to a heavenly realm—but even that was a realm of time, while the realization of Brahman carried the connotation of timelessness. Even an everlasting life of happiness is not the ultimate in the fulfilment of human destiny. Thus inasmuch as time is an element of the world, the overcoming of time becomes the end-in-view of the characteristically Vedantic way of life. This is summarized in the Katha Upanishad as follows: "When the five instruments of knowledge stand still, together with the mind, and when the intellect does not move, that is called the Supreme State."

This is the supreme state partly because the divine "sport" called history is suffused by pain, or suffering—which refers to more than specific experiences of unhappiness. Suffering is the distinction between the ideal and the fact, between the desirable and the obtained, between tomorrow and today or vice-versa. It is a thing of time itself and time will never remove it. Thus the celebrated eleventh thesis of Marx against Feuerbach would impress the yogi as sheer lack of discernment: to place one's hope in any plan within history and to seek one's fulfilment in it is due to misconception.

We must observe that this view, and the consequent, very negative, appraisal of action in this scheme do not immediately entail inaction. The question can never be whether to do anything or not. The statement "I am not doing anything" is indeed always literally wrong. The issue is not whether one should *do* anything. It is, rather, what sorts of things should one do? A typical Indian answer to this

last question is to be culled from two related Indian philosophical systems, the Samkhya and the Yoga.

I suppose four ingredients go into the making of any viable metaphysics: a deep existential concern, a measure of logical acumen, imaginative ingenuity and powers of observation. The Samkhya and the Yoga systems have all of these. They are different in some important respects, but it is their common elements that are of interest to us here. The deep existential concern of the Samkhya-Yoga system is to put an end to suffering which consists in freeing oneself from the tyranny of names and forms. Even if the system is unsatisfactory, it does not contain glaring logical inconsistencies. It is an imaginatively ingenious system based on observation as follows:

We begin with that which is not directly available to inspection but which is there wherever there is anything physical. The Sanskrit equivalent of the Scholastic prime matter is Prakrti. The term "prakrti," however, is etymologically analyzable into *pra,* meaning first, and *kar* meaning to make. At least in the Samkhya, therefore, the term prakrti seems to carry the connotation of power. Rather than "nature," as is usually done, it would perhaps be less ambiguously rendered as "energy-stuff" or "physical world."

The most significant observation of the Samkhya-Yoga is that there are in the physical world three elements: the first has to do with the comparative refinement of things; some things are more refined than others: the human brain, for example, would be more refined than a piece of rock. The second element is élan as Bergson uses the term, and the third, impediment to élan or impulse. When an arrow travels at n miles an hour and not at n plus 1, it is because something is holding it at its given speed. That is the impediment. I could make all this sound more esoteric and perhaps more profound by giving the Sanskrit terms, but I will resist the temptation.

A significant assumption of the Samkhya-Yoga is that matter is matter and it is not conscious at *any* level of refinement. It is perhaps as an accident of language that the Samkhya-Yoga thinks of sensitivity or consciousness as something *added* to sheer matter. The theory appears to be that a cell for example, is not living matter, but matter plus something called life. In this framework of thought, in order to account for consciousness, the Samkhya-Yoga has to posit something other than Prakrti which, added to Prakrti makes of people self-conscious organisms. This added thing is called Purusa, usually translated as spirit, but better still as spirit-monad.

The question arises of course, how is spirit related to the physical world. Having the benefit of modern technology we may illustrate the answer as follows: consider an emission from a TV station. A mass of rusted iron will not catch that emission but a TV set will. So far as I can follow the Samkhya-Yoga text, that is the relation between spirit-monad and energy-stuff. This is what is meant by the statement that at a certain level of refinement or purity, when the sattvic element predominates, to use the technical phrase, the physical world "reflects" spirit.

Knowing what we know of Indian, and, more specifically of Upanishadic ethical-religious preferences, we can guess the remaining two important points of the Samkhya-Yoga. One is that the physical world is the sort of energy-bearing thing that is geared to let the spirit-monad go free in the end. Prakrti by itself cannot exhibit consciousness, but a sort of intentionality is built into it, though this is disputed by commentators. The other point is this: so long as the spirit-monad is under the impression that it in fact is what it only appears to itself, namely as caught in the physical world, it is in a state of ignorance. So long, to revert to our illustration, as the emission caught in this TV set thinks that it is Dick Cavett, it is in ignorance, for the fact is that it is only a series of electrical impulses. In the end, of course, all TV images are series of electrical impulses and there is no real difference between Dick Cavett and Raquel Welch. They only become Dick Cavett or Raquel Welch on the screen. But to get away from TV boxes and personalities, we are saying that at the nodal point of consciousness something other than matter, namely spirit must be posited.

The Samkhya-Yoga system was formulated two or three thousand years ago. A question we may *now* ask could not have arisen in the minds of its framers. This is the question: does a refined composition of energy-stuff have to be produced by nature in order to reflect the spirit monad? Or would a similar thing but man-made also reflect the spirit monad? Can a machine have consciousness? Had the Samkhya philosophers asked themselves this question, the answer would have been as follows: the sort of thing we think of as spirit-monad, which does not fit the description of what we think of as energy-stuff, must be reflected *in* energy-stuff from the outside, as it were, for the latter to acquire a quality we call consciousness. This is the way they would put it, though there are of course many other verbal ways of expressing the same assumption which remains untestable to date.

The metaphysical modality of the relationship between the physical world and spirit-monads is crucial in the manner in which the Samkhya-Yoga system determines its theory of action. It is through the reflection of spirit in the physical world that consciousness becomes possible. But then the danger is to be victimized by a very genuine illusion. The danger is for the spirit-monad to take itself-as-reflected for itself—i.e. the spirit-monad in its appearance for the spirit-monad itself. It follows that the aim of the spirit-monad, "the informing self, silent, peaceful, eternal" must be to seek release from the physical world as from a net. Spirit is, in this scheme, essentially isolated in the sense that it is uninvolved in, and even indifferent to all occurrences within Prakrti. It is a mere witness. To say the same thing differently, Prakrti and Purusa do not share any attribute, assuming existence is not an attribute.

This, then, is how the Samkhya-Yoga sees reality by way of reconciling, I presume, the rational faculty with the felt need to put an end to frustrations, while encouraging the will to exercise itself in that direction. The various transformations of the physical world are *for* the emancipation of each spirit-monad. We are given the example of a cook: "A cook having finished the cooking in

which he was engaged retires from the work; similarly Prakrti or the physical world being urged to action for the emancipation of the spirit, brings about the emancipation and thereafter stops her operations with regard to that spirit whom she has already liberated. . . . This action for another's sake," we are further told, "is just like the action for one's benefit."[3] We are told in Verse 64 of the Samkhya that "from the repeated study of the truth, there results the wisdom, 'I do not exist, naught is mine, I am not,' which leaves no residue to be known, is pure, being free from ignorance, and is absolute." This is interpreted to mean "I am the spirit, not productive" and because non-productive, "I have no action"—"Not I," and since without action, "I can have no possessions," hence "naught is mine."

Action in the Vedanta is analyzed as a mark of impairment. Where there is no imperfection there is no desire, and where there is no desire—or intention, some need to be fulfilled, there is no action. And again, Section 55 of the Samkhya reads: "Therein (i.e. in the body) does the sentient spirit experience pain arising from decay and death, due to the non-discrimination of the spirit from the body; thus pain is in the very nature of things." The commentary on this verse remarks that the fear of death—"may I not cease to be! may I continue to be!—being common to man as well as the smallest insect; and the cause of fear constituting pain, death is a source of pain."

One may read old age instead of decay, in which case we realize that yoga is also an attempt at overcoming the absurdity of the world, beyond action and in silence.

It is to be expected that from this perspective the world should be viewed as a theatre of change, but not of betterment. Pain is not an accident of any one period of history, it is built into the nature of existence itself. It is for this very reason that action and all temporal existence belong in the same sphere, inasmuch as in the absence of any pain action is not called for. "The vehicle of action," the Yoga Sutra tells us, "has its origin in affliction," explaining that by action both good and bad actions are meant. There is a certain level of spiritual maturity where a necessary correlation is seen between virtue and vice on one hand, and pleasure and pain on the other. But to the discriminating the mere fact of change will produce a contrary effect in the very state of pleasure itself. This is for the discerning self a matter of intellectual appraisal, rather than an experiential awareness. Just as whenever there is a speeding object the specific pace is an indication of a restraining power, even so in any pleasure there is an element of pain. It follows that intensification of pleasure will entail the intensification of pain and the vehicle of action, as the Sutra calls it, becomes and grows without promise of fulfillment.

By the same token frustration is built into striving. The solution is not, as ordinarily done in Western circles, to elevate striving to a position of high valuation and look upon palpable achievements as signs of divine favor. Nor is it resignation to the view that civilization is the goal to achieve and discontent is the price to pay. It is Yoga Sutra's claim that pain is avoidable; and that the

cause of avoidable pain is the conjunction of the known and the knowable. The desire to know is still desire, while the ideal is desirelessness.

"The knowable," moreover, "is of the nature of illumination, activity, and inertia," a total perspective from which the choices open to a man are two: emancipation and action or works. But this is a peculiar sort of practical dualism in the sense that it is not a matter of either/or. Even when emancipation is chosen, action must be chosen as a means. And this is the logic of the organic connection between the yogas of discipline, of works and of knowledge: the first of these achieves unusual control of the body, including the inner organs such as the heart; the second refers to a way of life or yoga morality; and the third refers to the intuitive knowledge of Being.

We may conclude that action in Indian thought generally, must not be shunned, for that is impossible. One must at least breathe. But the sphere of action must be examined from the proper perspective and action must be controlled so as to be used as a means of attaining non-action. It is because non-action alone, achieved in the seedless trance, is of unmixed value that Isvara, Patanjali's finite god, is a purusa or spirit among many, except that it has not experienced suffering, it has been untouched by actions and the results of actions.

The end-in-view in the Samkhya-Yoga system, and this is typical of Indian thought generally, is the disentanglement of spirit from the various transformations —from the very sphere of the physical world. This will be the result of the realization that in its true nature and status the spirit-monad is a witness, a spectator, an enjoyer in this sense, but not an actor on the stage of phenomenal existence, and the entertainment of such ideas in the mind is in keeping with a self-validating experience known as moksa or samadhi, liberation or supercon-scious oneness with the object of meditation.

The Indian philosophical systems, though different among themselves, always serve the same purpose: namely a movement away from the sphere of doing to the sphere of being where there is no intentionality. Intentionality in the Samkhya is when Prakrti or the physical world moves for self-negation for the emancipation of Purusa or spirit. Doing leads to doing in a painful endlessness where one pain replaces another except when that which is done is controlled to lead the doer beyond its own sphere.

It is in the Bhagavad-gita that we find the dramatic application of this theory. The purpose of the Bhagavad-gita is to drive home the point that one must place oneself consciously within the One and thus turn into a spectator of one's own actions as of those of every other agent. Thus is action seen in its true nature. Obligatory actions will be performed without attachment, without love or hate for the desirable or undesirable "fruit," without involvement, with the self as a mere witness. This non-attachment which is a cardinal notion in the Gita, can be the case, we are assured, without entailing disregard for consequences such as injury, or underachievement. The doer, we are told, must be free from attach-ment, must have no streak of egotism, full of resolution and zeal, unmoved by success or failure. From this perspective, the parting of the East and West would

be at the point where the West takes it for granted that the individual is entitled to do all he prudently can to preserve himself—and to make his own self-conscious life as pleasant as possible. To the East this is a hindrance or an impairment. The clinging to individual self-conscious life, the drive that makes one say 'I want to live' is a cause of misery. It must be done away with, though not through suicide, because suicide is self-assertion and only prolongs the agony of the self in the realm of time. One must tame one's will and overcome oneself by way of realizing the Brahman that one basically is. Self-consciousness is not to be valued, a view which makes it difficult to give one's consent to the Indian point of view. It is not only Western men who experience this difficulty. "I do not want to *be* sugar. I want to taste sugar," an Indian disciple is reputed to have said to his guru. The answer to this question takes on many shades in the history of Indian philosophy, all of which may well be a variant of the biblical injunction that he who is not ready to lose his life will not gain it.

Adverse criticism of the Indian theory of action and ethic may not be impossible. Philosophical oversights, psychological and general welfare problems and even economic grounds can be cited against them. Yet it does remain a viable option. There is one ad hominem argument which the knowledgable Western observer should guard against—and that is to hold Indian philosophy responsible for the notorious plight of the Indian people. Overpopulation, for example, is a major reason for that plight, and that is clearly in spite, and not because of the finest insights of Indian philosophy. To hold Indian ethics responsible for the misfortunes of the Indian people would be equivalent to holding Christ or Marx responsible for the mounting threats against decent living in our progressive West.

University of Dayton

NOTES

[1]The Journal of Philosophy, vol. lxviii, No. 9, p. 288.

[2]The Bhagavata ii, 9, 32. Cf. *History of Philosophy Eastern and Western,* S. Radhakrishnan et al. eds., vol. i, p. 123.

[3]Samkhya-karika, lvi.