

# Vedānta – Rāmānuja and Madhva: Moral Realism and Freedom vs. Determinism (4.11)

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## 1. Introduction

This is the second of two lessons on Vedānta ethics. To recap, there are two senses of the term “Vedānta”.

The first is the literal sense of “End of Vedas” and refers to the Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads—the latter part of the Vedas. The Vedas are the literature of the ancient Indo European people of South Asia. The Vedas themselves seem to have taken over a thousand years to form.

This body of literature is often divided into two parts. The first part – the Mantras and Brāhmaṇas – outline a Consequentialist style reasoning, where the justification of action (karma) in the form of sacrifices to the Gods – many of them bloody – is to get something in return. The second part of the Vedas – the *Āraṇyakas* and Upaniṣads – show a shift to a Procedural ethical theory, which connects the self (*ātmā*) with development (Brahman) under ideal conditions of self-governance. This is something shared by all living beings with an interest in self-development. This connection is non-material, but the self so inclined functions as a god in its life, determining its contingencies. The point of good action, on this account, is not an outcome, but merely one’s own authenticity in the face of persistent challenges.

The second sense of Vedānta is scholastic, and defines a philosophical orientation that attempts to explain the cryptic *Vedānta Sūtra (Brahma Sūtra)* of Bādarāyaṇa. There are many scholarly commentaries on this text. The largest number of commentaries, but perhaps the least philosophically famous, are those of the *Bhedābheda* (difference and non-difference) authors. There are three commentarial approaches that have taken the spotlight: Śaṅkara’s Advaita (Monistic) Vedānta, Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified Monistic) Vedānta and Madhva’s Dvaita (Pluralist) Vedānta.

In this lesson, we will examine Madhva’s and Rāmānuja’s approaches.

### 1.1 Moral Theory Primer

We reviewed the distinction between differing moral theories earlier in this course. As a reminder, let us refresh our memory:

- *Consequentialism*: the good (end) justifies the right (means).
- *Virtue Theory*: a good—virtue or strength—produces right action.

Both theories are remarkably alike, so much so they are often grouped together as *teleological*. Then there are two more possibilities, which we could call *procedural*.

- *Deontology*: the *right* is prior to the *good* as a matter of justifying choices.
- *Bhakti (Yoga) Theory*: the *right* causes the *good*.

These distinctions are a point of reference for the explication of many moral theories.

## 2. So-Called “Theistic Vedānta”

Madhva and Rāmānuja are both known for their apparent theism – the idea that God is all-good, all-powerful and all-knowing. Moreover, both are famous for their sectarian Vaishnavism – worship of Vishnu. Both are founders of traditions of Vaishnava practice that continues even today. However, the worship of Vishnu, the preserver, is not unique to them – and neither is theism. A close examination of

Śaṅkara's commentaries reveals not only a theism, but also Vaishnavism. However, this should not be much of a surprise. Vishnu as a deity is central to the Upaniṣads, especially the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. There, Death teaches the boy, Nachiketas, that persons who succeed in self-governance find themselves in the realm of Vishnu, the God of Preservation. On one level, this could be read as a metaphor: those who succeed in self-governance are preserved. Yet, on another level, this can be taken as literally true if Vishnu is the agent of preservation. Moreover, if as is usually taught, the consort of Vishnu is Bhūmi, or the Earth, practicing self-governance is the means of overcoming adversity and continuing to live on Earth. Even if we ignore the traditional association of Bhūmi and Vishnu, the theory of self-governance taught by Death entails that those who succeed in the task of avoiding injury via the project of Yoga (self-governance) continue to live without fatal injury. This characterises those who thrive during their Earthly existence. (Indeed, in the story, this is attested to by the return of Nachiketa to Earth after his meeting with Death, who taught self-governance.)

How does this continuity come about? Here, it is worthwhile reflecting on a strange coincidence. “*Yama*” is a term employed in the Indic tradition to name Death: the god who delivers the ethics of the Upaniṣads. However, “*yama*” is also the term used to denote moral constraint and political ideals. Are these homonyms or do we have related concepts at play in both cases? The latter is true because there is an obvious commonality: loss of freedom. Death is the loss of freedom. This is inevitable, and the only way to avoid it is by losing freedom to oneself: self-governance. When we lose freedom to ourselves, we self-control and avert disaster. The choice is ours: either have Death be an event that happens to us – this is biological death, which is the sudden and permanent failure of the body – or lose freedom to oneself via self-determination and self-domination – Yoga. So it is fitting that Death is the one who teaches us this ethics of Yoga (self-governance). The result of removing our freedom from ourselves is our own self-preservation.

Vishnu, as our self-preservation, is commensurate with Brahman: the development and progress that subsumes the self who has exerted an influence on its mind, intellect and senses in accordance with its interests in self-governance. Yoga, or self-governance, is the means. Good fortune (thriving by Earth) is an outcome. This is affirmed in varying degrees by the theistic Vedāntins – which is to say, all of the three Vedāntins that we are studying. However, there is room for philosophical manoeuvring. The manoeuvring has to do with the identity of the individual self.

Advaita Vedānta, following Śaṅkara, identifies the individual self (and, perhaps, even the ultimate self) with confusion. The ultimate self (*ātmā*) gets superimposed on what it is not (the other), and this creates a mistaken notion: our individuality. Bhakti as an ethics of generating the good by right action applies only to the confused self, as a kind of remediation. Moving to a higher account of the self leads to a Deontological account, which does not guarantee good outcomes. Yet, mokṣa or freedom is a good that a reasonable individual should strive for. Hence, we should abandon ethics at this higher level.

The confused self on Śaṅkara's account is the self of practical capacities: like the mind, or intellect. It is not the regal self that rides as a passenger in the his model of the chariot. When we transcend to the higher self, there is nothing to worship, no object to emulate. This in part is our freedom.

Perhaps in response to this, we find Rāmānuja and Madhva making a pitch for alternative accounts of individuality, which does not transcends the bounds of ethical reason. Freedom is about mediating practical requirements with the ideal. Hence, both offer bhakti accounts.

### 3. Madhva: Character Essentialism

Madhva Ācārya is the founder of the Dvaita school of Vedānta. Philosophically, it seems to be far removed from Advaita. Whereas Advaita Vedānta holds that there is only one substance (Brahman, which is *ātmā*), Madhva is a pluralist. According to Madhva, in his *Mahābhārātātātparyanirmaya* (*Explication of the Mahābhārata*, henceforth “MT”), there are three kinds of things: individual selves (*jīva*-s), the ultimate self (Brahman) and inanimate things. These are completely distinct (MT 1.701). There are an innumerable number of *jīvas* (MT 1.19) categorised into three levels. The bottom level is evil, the middle level is neither completely evil nor completely good and the top level is eternally good. Only *jīvas* in the

top level are eligible for liberation owing to their capacity for devotion to Vishnu (Brahman) (MT 1.121). Brahman, in contrast, is not a *jīva*. Dharma or ethics is not sufficient for freedom, but devotion to Brahman is necessary and sufficient (MT 1.109). The other two levels are composed of *jīvas* that transmigrate indefinitely and with no end.

*Jīvas* are conditional agents. The outcomes of their choices are delivered by Brahman. It is Brahman that makes people transmigrate (MT 1.100). In his works, we see an echo of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*: Brahman cannot be obtained by discourse or mere intelligence – only one who is chosen by God attains freedom (MT 1.78).

While Madhva's account may seem to be different from Śāṅkara's, there are ethical similarities. For instance, in Madhva's account, dharma or ethics does not result in liberation, and cannot be relied upon for freedom either. This is also Śāṅkara's position. Besides, in Madhva's account, it is Brahman that dispenses outcomes of choices to individuals. This is agreed to by Śāṅkara (and Rāmānuja) as well (Śāṅkara's and Rāmānuja's *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣyas* on II.i.34, and Madhva's *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* on II.i.35,iii.42). Moreover, in Madhva's account, the individual self is not the same as the ultimate self or *ātmā* – a position that resonates with Śāṅkara.

Madhva's originality consists in accounting for the individual (non-Brahman) self as an essentialised character. Character traits are the psychological propensities of an individual. Virtue ethics is primarily concerned with our character: good traits are virtues, and bad traits are vices. The tradition of philosophy connected with Yoga, of which the Upaniṣads are part, is mildly critical of character. They can either be good or bad: there are useful propensities, but also evil ones. In Madhva's account, these propensities comprise our personal identity. As we are defined by our virtues or vices, this is one part of us that can never change – so long as we maintain our personal identity. Hence, on this account, someone who is evil will be evil so long as they exist. They can never improve themselves. Moreover, in the Vedānta account, individual selves are uncreated. In Madhva's account, this entails that individual (non-Brahman) selves are eternal essences, rationally definable for all time by their character. They have no beginning. But correlatively, they may have no end, unless what accounts for their origin is reversed.

In Śāṅkara's account, what accounts for the origin of the self is a natural disposition to conflate the self and the other. The point of spiritual development is to counteract this by reversing this identification. However, in Madhva's account, our individuality is internal to our identity, and cannot be reversed.

One implication of this, in Madhva's account, is that exalted personages, such as Lakṣmī, the Goddess of Good Fortune (thought to be the consort of Vishnu) are one essentialised, unchanging self – a *jīva* (MT 1.82–3). The other implication, in Madhva's account, is that Brahman (Vishnu) is not an essentialised self. There is no character (psychological disposition) that defines Brahman's makeup. This is inexplicable until we recall that “Brahman” means development. So indeed, Brahman has no essentialised character, as it is open-ended and self-governing. Since Brahman is not constrained by its character (by not having any), it is in a position to facilitate the experiences of essentialised individuals. According to some commentators, this seems to imply that Brahman is above ethics (Buchta 2014). This is an imprecise conclusion, not based on Madhva's reasoning. Brahman is above virtue insofar as there are no character traits that define Brahman. But being above virtue is not the same as being above ethics. Brahman, in Madhva's account, has no essential character: it is the one self-governing item that determines its destiny by virtue of its freedom, and not its identity. Everything else requires Brahman to realise their ambitions.

In the context of moral philosophy, hence, Madhva appears to be a kind of moral realist, but one who regards devotion (Bhakti) as superior to following ethical rules, the practice of which is known as Deontology. Reflecting back on the chariot model from the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, it is not difficult to see the grounds for this. If selves are essentialised character traits, they are personalities that define combinations of mental, sensory and intellectual propensities. Using Platonic language, they are the soul. (In Indian philosophy there is a common tendency to invoke the idea of *jīva* exactly where the Platonic idea of the soul would make sense.) The ones that can overcome difficulty are those characters that are devoted to the self (the passenger), for only those who are devoted to this self can actualise self-governance, and

thereby, overcome trouble. This is not Śāṅkara's position. For him, the best account of dharma is Deontology because the right account of the self has no thing to be devoted to: it is the self as Brahman, with no consequence to procure or maximize. But it can also apparently have no grounds for obeying rules either. Freedom leads us to reject dharma in its pursuit.

Yet, we find grounds for a commonality between Śāṅkara and Madhva's positions: it is devotion to the (ultimate) self, not ethics understood Deontologically, that accounts for freedom (*mokṣa*).

As Śāṅkara appears to provide us a two level analysis, Madhva provides two as well, but somewhat inverted relative to Śāṅkara. Madhva's view is that at the level of the individual self, dharma is best understood Deontologically. Vishnu, preservation, is only pleased with Bhakti to it so the individual in the interest of freedom from trouble should pursue Devotion to the ideal of preservation: Vishnu. The distracting feature is that Madhva defines individuals via a descriptive (non-normative) Virtue Theory: the individual is one distinguished by character traits that lead to their actions. As these are fixed, and unchanging, only some will be able to be devoted, while others cannot. But this is not normative: it is not as though vicious people should act on their character traits. Rather, all should be devoted to preservation though most will not be able to. Attaining Brahman (Development), in his account, is about transcending the *teleological* concerns of good (*puṇya*) and evil (*pāpa*) via devotion to Preservation. One thereby becomes similar to Brahman in being free from trouble (MT 1.64).

The common element here is the identification of dharma with a Deontology that is insufficient to achieve the goal of freedom.

There are some differences between Madhva's account of the content of dharma from what we find in Rāmānuja and Śāṅkara. For instance, when most Vedāntins are challenged to defend the propriety of bloody animal sacrifices – par for course in the early Vedic Consequentialist ethics geared towards gaining the favour of the gods – Madhva is reputed to have held that the Vedas never called for animal sacrifice, and that this is a perversion of Vedic ethics. He interprets the *Brahma Sūtra* in such a manner that the topic does not arise. This contrasts sharply with Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja's responses, according to which animal sacrifice is part of Vedic ethics, and permissible in ritual contexts (see Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja on *Brahma Sūtra* III.i.25).

Is Madhva a moral realist? The reason for believing that Śāṅkara is a Moral Irrealist is that he regards dharma (ethical rules that regulate maximising consequences) to be applicable to selves that are essentially contingent and confused. Dharma has no permanent subject that it pertains to. Madhva, in contrast, believes that there are permanent subjects that Dharma pertains to. So, for this reason, he is a realist. Moreover, his account of the three classes of characters is a form of moral realism: elevated characters are eternally real and not fictions on this account. He falls short of embracing the means of actualizing our freedom under the banner of dharma. Here he distinguishes between Bhakti and Dharma. So soteriological freedom on his account is different from moral freedom: moral freedom is constrained by character, soteriological freedom by devotion.

As an interpretation of the Upaniṣads, Madhva's view appears to be challenging. The idea of essentialised selves, defined by their character, is not explicit in the Upaniṣads. It is rather a philosophical innovation called upon to reconcile the Upaniṣads' affirmation of a plurality of selves and the unity of Brahman. Philosophically, however, it seems to have something going for it. What it has in its favour is that it relies upon what seems to be a plausible account of individuality. Individuality survives change because it has to do with our character – something that informs our decisions and survives our life experiences. This account of selfhood strikes an odd pose with the idea of Brahman that Madhva takes from the Upaniṣads. Characters, frozen for all time by their internal traits, do not change, and are hence not in any way the same as Brahman (Development). This is Madhva's point. Yet, this account of personal identity as character-based places a limit on the dominion of Development: it can only change things if, the things in question are open to change. Brahman, in Madhva's approach, is incapable of helping everyone: only those open to change. This is an ethical point: only those defined by perfect characters can actualise Development. Those characterised by imperfect character cannot actualise Development.

#### 4. Rāmānuja: Discovering Moral Perfection

One dissatisfaction that one might have with both Śaṅkara's and Madhva's accounts of the self is that the self in these accounts are categorically incompatible with Brahman. In Śaṅkara's account, the individual self is a confusion that must be destroyed for the sake of development. In Madhva's account, selves never change, so they cannot have development as a trait. Rather, some selves are open to change, and those selves can be liberated.

A third option would hold that individual selves are individuals within the species of Brahman, or perhaps, selves are species within the Genus of Brahman. In this account, selves have Brahman as an essential trait. This is to say that such selves can change and develop as a matter of intrinsic identity. Selves are real by virtue of development on this account. Selves, in this account, are compatible with Brahman because they are *subsumed* by Brahman the way a category subsumes its instances.

All persons are equal and alike on this score: each has Brahman as a defining trait. Differences between persons have to do with their past choices, manifested as karma: choices understood in terms of their consequences. These consequences have a tendency to confuse individuals. Yet, if individuals can surrender to Brahman, they can regain their independence from trouble. The relationship between individuals and Brahman is the relationship between an *ātma* and the body, as set out in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. Each individual has Brahman as its *normative* ruler. If this is true, each individual has Brahman as its inner ruler or normative ruler (*Vedārthasaṅgraha* §99 pg. 79). This is Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita (Qualified Monist) account.

In the Upaniṣad's model, individuals and Brahman are ideally identical in contexts of self-governance. As the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* notes, individuals who can self-govern are preserved, and this preservation is made possible by the internalisation of development as the normative order. This internalisation of development allows individuals to leave aside a Consequentialist-based ethical model and pursue their own betterment. In Rāmānuja's account, this is simply what is true. But, moreover, what this entails is that Brahman is like a super organism, of which each one of us is a part. According to Rāmānuja, this renders Brahman the "inner ruler" of persons (Rāmānuja's *Gītā Bhāṣya* 18:15). In Rāmānuja's account, our essential trait as members of the set of Brahman is to serve Brahman. This is something that is true of all of us, whether we know our selves to be so or not (*Vedārthasaṅgraha* §99 pg. 79).

The challenge for the individual, however, is self-governance. The way to fail at this task is for the individual to identify with their bodies (*Vedārthasaṅgraha* §99 pg. 79). As members in the set of Brahman, we manage to govern ourselves if we identify with Brahman, properly understood – as the set of which we are members. This identification with the normative self is what Rāmānuja calls "*bhakti*" (devotion), which he identifies as a penetrating knowledge (*jñāna*). In time, this transforms into *para-bhakti*, which is an elated state of knowledge as joy in which the knower is free from the sorrows of *samsāra* (*Vedārthasaṅgraha* §§238–242). This is a state of release in which we know the distinction between natural forces and our essence. But in this state of self-awareness, our membership in Brahman reveals the self as an agent without having to identify with our past (*Śrī Bhāṣya* II.iii.38). We are hence liberated from our former troubles in knowledge and our body is likewise free from bearing the brunt of our personal identity.

Rāmānuja's account is unoriginal in many respects. It is lifted quite literally from the Upaniṣads. The idea that the self is the inner ruler of the body is what we find in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. The idea that the self is the inner controller also comes from this dialogue and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. The idea that the self is the same as Brahman is also something we find attested to in some portions of the Vedas, while others seem to affirm a multiplicity of selves that share Brahman.

However, his account offers certain elucidations. It elaborates how Brahman and individual selves can be identical at one level in the model of the Upaniṣads, but different to one another. Selves share Brahman as a defining trait, and in this respect, are identical. They are, however, numerically

different in so far as their personal ethical histories, defined by choices and their consequences, account for differing life experiences.

The idea that liberation has to do with Vishnu – the preserver – is something that we have noted is attested to in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. This is philosophically significant: liberation is not a destruction of oneself, but a preservation of oneself. Rāmānuja for his part identifies Brahman with Vishnu and his consort, Lakṣmī (who, in one form, is Bhūmī or the Earth). Rāmānuja’s worship of Vishnu here is in keeping with the logic of self-governance as the model for freedom. As ethical agents striving for self-governance the outcome is preservation.

Quite frequently, Rāmānuja’s philosophy is painted purely in religious terms. His own writings emphasise that all persons are supported by Brahman by virtue of its love, compassion and parental consideration, and that it is proper for us to submit to such a God (cf. Carman 1974). But these claims of submission are really about each one of us: not a completely other God. As each self is a member of a set of this divinity, whatever is true of it, is true of ourselves – in the final analysis. Brahman is not anyone aside from who we *ought to be* and what we truly are. Our true essence, hence, is love, compassion and parental consideration. When we actualise our subservience to Brahman, we actualise our self-governance, and thereby bring forward these characteristics of our identity. This comes about by placing our contingent self under the service of our ultimate self. This is freedom, when past karma does not dictate what happens to us: we do. Moral freedom and soteriological freedom amount to the same thing. To this end, Rāmānuja is a faithful exponent of Yoga, which holds the same position in starker form. (For more, see the introductory module on Yoga in this course.)

Another obstacle to appreciating the ethical essence of Rāmānuja’s teachings is the crude appropriation of “God” and divinity by religion and religious studies. In this account, mention of God is about religion: not ethics. But if we recall the history of moral philosophy going back to Plato, God was always invoked as the moral ideal. This is the point of Socrates’ discussion about the non-traditional importance of the idea of God for questions of ethics in the *Euthyphro*. God there stands for the moral ideal that we are obliged to meditate on, and not merely assume via tradition. Rāmānuja’s approach is identical. His point, however, is innovative and different when compared to Plato’s account. In Plato’s account, individuality is a brute psychological fact. It may be good or bad: there is nothing intrinsically normative about being an individual. In Rāmānuja’s account, in contrast, the individual is a member in the set of this moral ideal. Development – improvement, self-betterment – is part of who we are. Because we are members of the set of the moral ideal, we are authentic and fully apparent to ourselves when we understand ourselves thus, which in Rāmānuja’s language, amounts to being an instrumental (servant) of this superset.

There is hence an essential connection between our own personal freedom in Rāmānuja’s account and ethics. Moral freedom and soteriological freedom amount to the same thing. This is a classic thesis of Yoga. This sets Rāmānuja’s account apart from the account from Śaṅkara and Madhva. This ethical theism is reflected in Rāmānuja’s explicit affirmation of the mainline argument in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. In the model of ethics delivered by Death in the Upaniṣads, the charioteer is the intellect, responsible for reigning in the mind (reins) and senses (horses) for the sake of the self. This is Yoga. The dominion of Vishnu, Preservation, is where we go when we succeed at this task of Yoga. In the *Gītā*, it is Krishna (Vishnu) who assumes the role of the charioteer to take control of the mind and senses, steering his childhood friend, Arjuna. Vishnu delivers the lecture to Arjuna on deontology (*karma yoga*) and bhakti (yoga) with the associated rejection of Consequentialism. In the Deontological model, we should practice dharma without concern for the outcome because it is suitable to our own self-governance in a challenging world. The Bhakti model stresses that we understand the ethical as devotion to the ethical ideal of preservation itself. Rāmānuja, in his commentary on the *Gītā*, accepts these arguments as is, None needs to be rejected.

Towards the close of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Krishna makes a seemingly astonishing claim: that Arjuna may abandon all dharmas and come to him. Rāmānuja interprets this in one of two ways: (a) Arjuna can abandon the conventional account of dharma as defined by “śāstric injunction”, where ethical claims (of the *śāstras*, or treatises of traditional learning) are directed to maintaining ritual purity and

voiding ritual impurity (a virtue theoretic concern), or (b) Arjuna may not worry about Bhakti Yoga, and worry about working things out with Krishna directly (*Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya* 18:66). This latter interpretation is curious, as it is redundant: working things out with the ideal (personified by Krishna, who is Vishnu the Preserver) just is Bhakti. This might suggest that Rāmānuja has a slight Deontological bias in the way he formulates ethics (dharma) for this latter gloss makes it seem as though we get to keep Deontology while we embrace Bhakti.

## 5. Retrospective

The idea that Vedānta presents us an ethics is not new. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan argues as much in an essay now a century old. But the accounts that we have tended to receive from such figures is distorted. For instance, Radhakrishnan writes:

If there is any one end that is universally binding and that can be called a categorical imperative, it is, according to the Vedānta, the rule relating to the highest end. The ideal of unselfish service of humanity is the only absolute moral rule which ought never to be broken. (Radhakrishnan 1914, 178)

Radhakrishnan's claim that unselfish service to humanity is the only absolute moral rule of Vedānta is fiction. The Upaniṣads are not humanistic. Humanism is the idea that human beings and their lives are what is ultimately important. The doctrine of the self as development (*ātmā* as Brahman) is inimical to this form of speciesism – the idea that our ethical interests are defined by any species – including humanity – is undermined by the identification of our interests with development. All animals have an interest in development: this is not restricted to humans. Our identity in the Upaniṣad's account is not reducible to our species. This is true whether one adopts Śaṅkara's, Madhva's or Rāmānuja's gloss.

One value of the Vedānta approach to ethics is that it provides a non-speciesist framework to think about ethics. It allows us to understand ourselves (*ātmā*) and our interest in development (Brahman) as conceptually distinct, though identical in some manner. The Advaita view is that this identity is strict. The individual self is a murky pathology. Ethics in so far as it pertains to the individual is also a murky pathology. The Dvaita approach is that Brahman realises the results of choices of individuals, but only some, owing to their character, are capable of taking advantage of this. The essentially good selves are able to realise their interest in Development, while the non-essentially good cannot. Ethics as rules of constraint on this account are not productive of freedom: an elevated character is. But as character is our personal identity, those with the appropriate character can actualise their freedom, while the rest never will.

The Viśiṣṭādvaita approach of Rāmānuja suggests in contrast that each self is a microcosm of reality. Reality is Brahman – development – as a superset, containing individual selves. Each self has development as an essential, defining trait, but owing to past choices (karma), this is poorly understood. The inclusion of all selves within Brahman is God's grace: it is the compassion and condescension of the ultimate normative self that embraces individuals, despite a less than perfect history. Things change when the individual self understands Brahman to be its true self, for then an individual can re-direct their efforts from procuring results to self-control. This actualises self-governance – of the contingent lower self-defined by past choices by the normative self of development. Ethical rules are the means of actualising this self-governance. The result is that none of us have to be defined by our contexts, like charioteers racing past trouble.

Karl Potter, editor of the *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* (Potter In Progress), has this to say about Rāmānuja's thought:

Rāmānuja, we have seen, elevates God [i.e., Brahman] to the supreme position in his ontology and elevates bhakti to the supreme position among the paths. In

the last analysis, it is God's grace alone that can obtain freedom for us. Then what is the function of philosophy? Apparently Rāmānuja takes philosophy to be not the resolver of doubts, but rather the path of knowledge itself. This implies that doubts are to be encouraged, as they lead one to embark upon the path of knowledge.... [Rāmānuja's] Viśiṣṭādvaita grows into a fervently devotional religion, and in Śrīvaiṣṇavism of the present day, an exceedingly influential sect in parts of the South, Rāmānuja's personality and organization of ritual comes to be seen as more important than his philosophical writings. With its emphasis on *bhakti* and *prapatti* [(surrender)], this development of Rāmānuja's tradition can be said to represent one of the main arteries through which philosophy reached down to the masses, and it may be that Viśiṣṭādvaita is today the most powerful philosophy in India in terms of numbers of adherents, whether they know themselves by that label or not. Viśiṣṭādvaita is not, however, the philosophy which the West associates with India, nor is it the avowed position of the large proportion of nineteenth and twentieth century professional philosophers in Indian universities. (Potter 1963, 252-253)

Potter's observations ring true. If anything, it is the position of Advaita Vedānta that appears to be very popular among leading figures of Indian thought, while Rāmānuja's position may be characteristic of the common attitude, that doing the right thing (dharma) is the surest way to freedom (mokṣa). The moral irrealism of Advaita Vedānta (doing the right thing does not result in freedom, and in the final analysis, is an evil) seems to have no popular traction. It is worth noting that in the context of philosophy, Rāmānuja's doctrine of Grace is the idea of our essential nature as development taking control of the contingent aspects of our life. This is self-governance. Insofar as Rāmānuja's ideas of *bhakti* (devotion to Brahman) and *prapatti* (surrender to Brahman) are taken seriously on the ground in India, it seems that Rāmānuja's moral philosophy of surrender to our essential normative nature is popular in India. Here we might also be inclined to include Madhva as agreeing with Rāmānuja, however he falls short of identifying ethics with *bhakti*—the practice of the right as generative of the good.

One might attempt the following objection to this approach to ethics: self-governance is certainly good for oneself, but it sacrifices the interests of the many for the interests of the few, namely oneself. This criticism ignores the fact that in actualising self-governance, in Rāmānuja's model, we actualise what we have in common. Articulating what we actualise involves adding to the vocabulary of contemporary analytic ethics. Currently, philosophers distinguish between agent relative and agent neutral obligations and interests (cf. Ridge 2011). Suppose we have an obligation to help friends. Who we help is agent relative. Suppose we have an interest in maximising happiness or welfare. Who we help is agent neutral. If it is agent neutral, it does not follow that the bounty is something shared equally by all who could benefit. Rather, it may be possible to maximise agent neutral values and benefit some disproportionately. Suppose we have an interest in maximising Brahman, which is to say, our essential trait of development, which we share with other agents. This is, in some respect, agent relative, for each one of us has an interest in this. However, as we share this and maximise it, we maximise what we have in common. This is agent neutral. If agent relativity and agent neutrality are mutually exclusive, maximising Brahman (development) involves a third option: agent inclusivity. When we maximise our own self-governance by actualising development, we maximise something that includes all others. In which case, we do not have to face dilemmas of choosing between our self-interest and the interest of the impartial general good. Altruism is a problem for those whose self-interest is agent relative. Then, some extra argument is required to make sense of our obligation to others. But if our self-interest is agent inclusive, we help others by helping ourselves.

Similarly, one might counter that Vedānta ethics is bound up with the morality of caste. Caste is an evil, and hence, so is Vedānta ethics. Let us assume that caste is a social evil. While it is certainly true that Vedāntins themselves – whether Śāṅkara, Rāmānuja or Madhva – approved of the moral order of the

caste system (*varṇāśramadharmā*) in their works, this is not obviously part of the main Vedānta argument for ethics. Indeed, reflecting back on the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, there is already a criticism of caste as relevant to moral standing. What counts is not our social position, in Death's account, but self-governance. Those who self-govern survive, while caste is destined for death. This is further elaborated by Rāmānuja. What we have in common with all other selves is an interest in self-governance. All selves are essentially equal in this regard, and none can be treated as intrinsically better than any other, much less for considerations of caste. This approach to moral standing provides us ground for seeing people from differing cultural and social backgrounds and even species as equal to us in a basic moral light. Finally, even Madhva's account of character inequality is not a straightforward justification of the caste system. Individuals are unequal, in Madhva's account, owing to their moral character – not their social roles. The caste system is a virtue theoretic idea: the character of individuals based on hereditary determines their actions. Virtue theory is not defended by Vedānta thinkers as the basic formulation of ethics.

It is common practice in the study of moral philosophy to distinguish the main arguments of philosophers from contingent and inessential beliefs they may have, which (though odious) are inconsistent with their main tenets. Social inequality, though passively endorsed by Vedāntin philosophers, does not often sit well with their main arguments. In the case of the Upaniṣads, there is no obvious foundation for such expectations on the model of self-governance.

A final objection defers to a traditional distinction between karma and *jñāna* – action and knowledge. Vedāntins describe the former part of the Vedas as concerned with action, and the latter with knowledge. This shows that the Upaniṣads on their own account are not concerned with ethics, as they are not concerned with action, but with knowledge.

The idea that ethics essentially has to do with action is something not shared by all ethical theories. Virtue theories reject this, for instance. It is a sign of a deontic theory that they often identify the locus of moral concern with action. So, the failure of Vedāntins to conceptualise the Upaniṣads as action-oriented does not count against its ethical significance. More importantly, karma in the Indic tradition is action analysed in terms of choice and consequence. It is a Consequentialist account of acting. The idea of karma yoga, against this backdrop, is the discipline of action as goal-oriented. This is to put limitations on the consequentialism of action. Moving away from action as a consequentialist affair to knowledge – self-knowledge – is what is natural for Proceduralist, who understands the individual in terms of rights (freedoms) and obligations (duties). The Proceduralism of the Upaniṣad is a uniquely Indian contribution to moral philosophy that is easily ignored if all ethics is reduced to Consequentialism. The various secondary versions of Vedānta with their vastly differing accounts of morality are also easily ignored, if we are not attentive to the arguments in play for the respective epistemic accounts of freedom and the self, understood variously in terms of epistemic (*jñāna*) capacities.

### **The following Reading material will be of special help:**

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## Glossary

Letter	Term	Definition
A	<i>Ātmā (ātman)</i>	Self
B	bhakti	devotion
	Brahman	Development, Greatness
	Brahma Sūtra	A purported summary of the philosophy of the Upaniṣads. Also known as the <i>Vedānta Sūtra</i>
C	Consequentialism	Theory of ethics that identifies right action in terms of outcomes and states of affairs external to the agent
D	<i>Dvaita</i> Vedānta	Pluralist Vedanta
	Deontology	Theory of ethics that identifies right action in terms of duties
U	Upaniṣad	Dialogue portions of the Vedas, which comes later in the chronology and of the Vedas
V	Veda	Ancient corpus of text, written over a 1,000 years, of the ancient South Asian branch of the Indo-European people
	Vedānta	End of the Vedas. Or, school of philosophy based on an interpretation of the <i>Brahma Sūtra</i>
	<i>Viśiṣṭādvaita</i> Vedanta	Qualified Monism
	Virtue Theory	Theory of ethics that focuses on character traits

## Points to Ponder

- While Śaṅkara's account of the self as superimposition might be more popular among educated Indians, Rāmānuja's Theistic Vedānta is more popular in India.
- Rāmānuja's Vedānta is an egalitarian theory of ethics, according to which all individual selves are members of the set of Development, regardless of birth, species, sex, race....
- If ever person is a member of the set of Brahman, then Brahman is a defining trait of every individual.

## Questions

1. Correct Answer	1	According to Madhva, there are only two kinds of things.
	True	
x	False	
		While Madhva's view is known as " <i>Dvaita</i> ", it is incorrectly understood as "dualistic". The term is better understood as "pluralism".

2. Correct Answer	2	According to Madhva, all selves are equal.
	True	
x	False	
		Madhva holds that selves, with exception of Brahman, are defined by their character, and some characters are virtuous while others are vicious.

3. Correct Answer	3	According to Madhva, the way to freedom is via Ethics.
	True	
x	False	
		Madhva's view is that devotion to Brahman results in freedom, but this is different than ethics.

4. Correct Answer	4	According to Rāmānuja, adherence to one's duties is a means of procuring freedom.
x	True	
	False	

5. Correct Answer	5	According to Rāmānuja, selves are unequal: some are better (those that are more devoted to God) than others.
	True	
x	False	
		Rāmānuja holds all selves to be equal in moral dignity.

6. Correct Answer		The Karma Yoga of the <i>Gītā</i> is Deontology.
x	True	
	False	

7. Correct Answer	7	According to Rāmānuja, all selves are defined by Brahman.
x	True	
	False	

8. Correct Answer	8	According to Madhva, some selves will never gain freedom.
x	True	
	False	

9. Correct Answer	9	According to Ramanuja, understanding Brahman is understanding our own higher self.
x	True	
	False	

10. Correct Answer	10	According to Rāmānuja, Brahman is an “inner controller”.
x	True	
	False	