

The Centrality of Mokṣa in Indian Philosophy

§1: On a busy winter-semester afternoon, Neelam & I met for a quick lunch at the noisy and crowded cafeteria on the second floor of CEU N15 building.

Neelam: Have you decided the topic for your World Philosophy Paper?

Nikhil: Yes. I will investigate whether liberation is the focal concern of classical Indian philosophy.

Neelam: Interesting. That certainly seems to be the dominant view.

Nikhil: It might be the dominant view, but that doesn't mean it is also the *correct* view.

Neelam: I agree. But then don't most Indian Texts explicitly commit themselves to this claim? Both the Nyāya Sūtra and the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra declare that their study leads to Niḥśreyasa. That Nirvāṇa and Mokṣa are respectively the *summum bonum* in Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta is hardly debatable.

Nikhil: That's right. But then, Cārvāka thinkers believe neither in karma nor in Mokṣa. Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā does not even ritually proclaim itself to be concerned with Mokṣa. Given such clear counter-examples, the general claim that liberation is the focal concern of Indian Philosophy is patently false.

Neelam: I don't think what makes the claim interesting is its universal applicability. Nor do I think that those who believe in it do so because it is formally, logically correct. The appeal of the claim is not that it holds true of *all* Classical Indian Philosophies.

Nikhil: What do you mean?

Neelam: Remember the point Kasulis makes using those Gestalt Images? I think the motivation behind the claim is to highlight the importance & centrality of liberation in classical Indian thought, not its exclusivity. While a concern for liberation may be found in philosophical traditions across the world, in classical Indian Philosophy such concern is central, not peripheral.

Nikhil: Maybe. But then, only a very broad, vague, and loose understanding of the word *liberation* would warrant clubbing together conceptions as diverse as the Naiyyayika Niḥśreyasa, Vedāntin Mokṣa, and the Buddhist Nirvāṇa. While Naiyyayika Niḥśreyasa involves acquiring knowledge of the categories and the distinctions amongst them, Vedāntin Mokṣa involves acquiring *brahma jñāna* i.e. realization of the non-duality of reality. So, either we must accept ambiguity in our usage of the word 'liberation' or accept that only one of these may actually be called liberation and the rest cannot.

Neelam: You are reducing the debate to a verbal quibble, something a Naiyyayika would readily identify as *vitaṇḍa*. What is interesting about the claim is that the idea of release from the karmic cycle is important for the Indian culture & that most classical Indian philosophies emphasize, enhance, and preserve the ideal of liberation as central. All that is meant is that classical Indian philosophies are purposive; their ruminations seem to revolve around this cultural ideal: they explicitly declare liberation to be their aim, they prescribe means of achieving it, and they distinguish themselves from each other based on which path they consider as leading to liberation.

Nikhil: Even so, it is an uncomfortable claim to accept. I even find it insulting. It seems to suggest that classical philosophers in India used reason only instrumentally, they lacked the quintessential philosophical ability to reflect for reflections' sake, use reason autonomously and follow the argument where it leads. It makes classical philosophy seem more like apologetics than philosophy.

Neelam: I do not agree with your assumptions about what philosophy is. Kierkegaard was devoted to the purpose of finding out *how one can become a Christian*; does that make him any less a philosopher? Frege began his philosophical project with the aim of disproving psychologism about mathematics; does this fact reduce the philosophical stature of Frege? And does St. Anselm's commitment to the existence of God make the ontological argument for existence of God any less appealing?

Nikhil: The matter of what counts as philosophy and what doesn't is difficult and contentious. But we ought not open that can of worms now. Both of us must rush for our classes now!

Neelam: Yes, we must! I gather that you disagree with the claim; but don't not lose sight of what makes the claim *interesting*. Argumentation is central to philosophy, but the temptation to refute a proposition with clever arguments mustn't mislead us into losing sight of what got us interested in it in the first place.

§2: On an early-spring morning, as blossoming trees turn Budapest outdoors into a *tableaux vivant*, Neelam and I wait for our turn to submit residence-permit extension documents in the tedious indoors of a Hungarian immigration office.

Neelam: Did you make any progress with the world philosophy paper?

Nikhil: Yes. I read a few chapters from Daya Krishna's book. I am quite convinced that he is correct in his rejection of the claim about centrality of Mokṣa in Indian Philosophy.

Neelam: That's interesting! What does he say?

Nikhil: He begins with some very unproblematic assumptions about the nature of philosophy. Don't you agree that whatever else doing philosophy requires, it certainly involves engaging in theoretical & conceptual analysis?

Neelam: I think I agree.

Nikhil: If you agree with this then you cannot assent to the philosophical centrality of Mokṣa.

Neelam: That's one massive non-sequitor!

Nikhil: The point here is that one can't account for the very possibility of theoretical & conceptual analysis within Indian philosophy if one takes it to be purposive. To borrow Daya Krishna's words, the speculative enterprise of Classical Indian philosophy seems to conflict with or, at least be irrelevant to, its presumed primary and sole concern with liberation.

Neelam: Why should a concern with liberation preclude engagement in theoretical & conceptual issues? One might need to engage in reflection on theoretical or conceptual issues for a variety of reasons, say, to overcome one's own doubts concerning the *nature* of liberation and the path that leads to it. Theoretical or conceptual analysis doesn't presuppose that enquiry be secular.

Nikhil: You seem to be arguing on the lines of Karl Potter. He too thinks that philosophy arose in India either to meet the intellectual difficulties which may obstruct a person's progress towards liberation or out of a need to respond to the sceptic and the fatalist. But Daya's arguments against Potter's views are quite compelling.

Neelam: What does Daya Krishna say?

Nikhil: He contends that a need to argue against the sceptic and fatalist must have arisen only because the sceptic and the fatalist did not believe in liberation. But then, if it is held that the purpose of classical Indian philosophers was liberation then Potter must consider the sceptic and fatalist to be *non-philosophers*, and that is unacceptable!

Neelam: I am not convinced. This would count as an argument only if we consider the claim that liberation is the focal concern of Indian philosophy to be a *strict generalization*, which it needn't be.

Nikhil: Perhaps. But this is not his central argument. He also contends that just as intellectual difficulties concerning nature of motion raised by Zeno never incapacitated him from walking, likewise, it is implausible that intellectual difficulties can ever impede or obstruct one's attainment of a non-cognitive, non-intellectual, and non-rational ideal of *Mokṣa*.

Neelam: I understand. So basically, the argument is that the centrality of Mokṣa does not adequately explain the speculative character of classical Indian philosophy.

Nikhil: Yes. It will make it mysterious why classical Indian philosophers felt the need to investigate theoretical & conceptual issues utterly unrelated to Mokṣa: say, the exhaustive study of the nature of Pramāṇa or Hetvābhāsa in the Nyāya Sūtra, the lengthy discussion on the various ‘categories’ such as dravya, guṇa, karma, sāmānya etc. in the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra, or the century long debate between the Buddhists and the Naiyyayikas on the nature of pratyakṣa. None of these concerns seem to be related to the presumed and proclaimed concern for *Mokṣa* that is purportedly central in all Indian Philosophies.

Neelam: But then, both the Nyāya Sūtra and the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra state that their study leads to *Niḥśreyasa*. Is Daya asking us to not to take these works seriously?

Nikhil: Daya obviously intends them to be taken seriously! But he argues that the words of the composers cannot be taken seriously when they say that the study of their works leads to liberation.

Neelam: I don’t understand! How can one take a work seriously and yet disregard the words within it?

Nikhil: Daya doesn’t intend to disregard the words; he only invites us to examine the motivations of the composers within the Indian philosophical tradition in stating that liberation is the purpose of their composition. Such motivations and the context in which they wrote provide us good reasons to believe that the composers were not themselves sincere in stating the importance of liberation.

Neelam: That’s not clear. Can you explain more?

Nikhil: Yes. Daya argues that the claim that their study would lead to liberation is not unique to *philosophical* works in classical India. Texts within disciplines as diverse as poetry, music, dance, grammar, sex, economics make the same claim. He even produces excerpts from Saṅgīta ratnākara, Suśrutasaṃhitā, Anaṅga-raṅga etc. to prove his point.

Neelam: Ok. But what are you getting at?

Nikhil: Well, the ideal of Mokṣa was greatly valued in the Classical Indian culture. In order to draw attention to their work & earn respectability, the composers within all classical Indian schools & disciplines paid lip service to the cultural ideal of Mokṣa even though their works had nothing to do with it. It was typical for composers to formally declare that the study of their composition leads to Mokṣa, only to promptly set it aside in pursuit of their less transcendent interests.

Neelam: So, is he proposing that an interest in Mokṣa that we find mentioned at the beginning of classical Indian compositions serves as a mere rhetorical device?

Nikhil: Yes. In fact, he says that such rational & empirical analyses, hairsplitting distinctions, and concepts, particularly *dharma*, that we find elaborated upon in classical philosophical compositions are often incommensurable with Mokṣa.

Neelam: That's interesting.

Nikhil: But then he presents further arguments to bolster his point: Navya-Nyāya logicians, who dominated the philosophical scene in India from 12th till 17th century did not have any concern for Mokṣa, Mokṣa seems to be only a later addition to the list of Puruṣārthas, and there is evidence for multiple authorship of both the Nyāya & Vaiśeṣika texts, and Mokṣa concerning sutras may have been slipped in later.

Neelam: I appreciate your enthusiasm for the argument and am happy to accept Daya's conclusion. But I am still wondering *why* someone would be so interested in establishing the non-centrality of Mokṣa. What makes this conclusion so important to warrant such great argumentative effort?

Nikhil: I guess that has to be a topic for some other day as we're next in the queue. Let's submit our documents and get out of here.

§3: On a soothing spring-afternoon, Neelam & I stroll on the banks of Danube as it flows gracefully between Buda & Pest. We had just returned from a Lunch meeting with Prof. Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, when this conversation inevitably crept in.

Neelam: Do you remember the talk by Prof. Arvind Sharma that we attended in Delhi?

Nikhil: Yes. But what made you ask?

Neelam: I found a lot of similarity between what Prof. Sharma said after his talk and what Prof. Chakravarthi was saying today.

Nikhil: How so?

Neelam: In responding to a question concerning portrayal of women in classical Indian texts Prof. Sharma had said that he held an *encyclopedic* view of Indian Philosophy, i.e. the view that Indian classical texts do not reflect agreement on any one position and it's possible to find a wide range of often competing and contradictory positions within them.

Nikhil: Yes, I remember.

Neelam: And when you asked Prof. Chakravarthi today if he too believed that liberation is the central concern of Classical Indian Philosophy, he almost refused to respond. Both seem to oppose generalizations about Classical Indian Philosophy.

Nikhil: I agree with you there. For Prof. Chakravarthi, the very use of the term *Indian Philosophy* was to enter an inexcusable realm of generalization. He insisted on reframing the question to whether liberation is the central concern of some *specific text* within the Indian Tradition.

Neelam: Yes.

Nikhil: While Kasulis may be right in stating that some issues which are in the background in some cultures may be in the foreground in another, it is also true that focusing too much on what's on the foreground masks the divergence of pursuits and interests within a culture. It is naïve and perhaps unscholarly to have broad generalizations guide one's study of an entire tradition of thought.

Neelam: But then, if such generalizations obstruct textual exegesis, what explains our interest in such general questions like the question about the centrality of Mokṣa? What makes responding to them worth the effort?

Nikhil: I share your wonderment. I was so overwhelmed by the intricacy of Daya's arguments concerning the lack of synonymy between the pair Niḥśreyasa-Apavarga in Nyāya Sūtra and the pair and Mokṣa-Dharma in the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra that I felt that if the only achievement of such analysis is refutation of non-centrality of Mokṣa, it would be a rather pyrrhic victory. I wonder if Daya has, as the British put it, *a bigger fish to fry*.

Neelam: I think so too. After our last conversation, I was tempted to look at Potter's response to Daya Krishna.

Nikhil: What does Potter say?

Neelam: Potter presents Daya as a professional philosopher committed to a view of philosophy wherein philosophy is primarily concerned with conceptual analysis.

Nikhil: Ok.

Neelam: And so, given such commitments, he is tempted, firstly, to understand even classical Indian philosophical tradition as having been driven by the need for conceptual analysis, and secondly, to take any conception of Indian 'philosophy' as a Mokṣa-seeking enquiry a plot by 'religious-types' to turn it into a spiritual enterprise. He is opposed to philosophical centrality of Mokṣa because to him it makes it seem that Indian philosophy is *spiritual*, which he takes to be a mistaken conception, a *myth*.

Nikhil: Yes. Perhaps the debate about the philosophical centrality of Mokṣa is motivated after-all by one's assumptions regarding what philosophy is!

Neelam: Or so it seems!

Bibliography

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