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Periodization of Indian ontologies

Eli Franco has done me the favour of putting at my disposition an unpublished text – prepared by him and Karin Preisendanz – in which, among other things, Erich Frauwallner's ideas about the periodization of Indian philosophy are discussed. In some articles whose existence many would rather forget, Frauwallner gave expression to a view about the development of Indian philosophy as being driven by two forces, the one Aryan, the other non-Aryan. Franco and Preisendanz sum up this view as it finds expression in the article "The Aryan component of Indian philosophy", which came out in 1939,[1] Frauwallner argues that the history of Indian philosophy can be divided into two periods. The first period begins in Vedic times, peaks with the philosophical systems developed in the first half of the first millennium, and then declines and ends towards the close of the first millennium A.D. The second period begins with Śaṅkara and continues until the eighteenth century when the introduction of Western ideas under the British dominion puts an end to the development of indigenous Indian philosophy. The transition from the first to the second period cannot be explained as a continuous, unitary development. Rather, a dramatic change took place. The older systems (Sāṃkhya, Vaiśeṣika, Lokāyata, Buddhism and Jinism) were atheist in the sense that they did not rely on a supreme god as a basic principle. They were not, Frauwallner says, religiously and dogmatically bound …, but strove to derive their teachings scientifically, without presuppositions … The new systems were theistic, and the divine revelation by Śiva or Viṣṇu was acknowledged as the supreme source of knowledge. In view of the fact that the religions of Śiva and Viṣṇu are non-Aryan in origin, one

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[1] The German version of the text by Franco and Preisendanz has now come out in Frauwallner 2010a, esp. p. XXIII f. The English translation of Frauwallner's book (Frauwallner 2010b) does not contain Franco and Preisendanz's text, but it does contain an interesting preface by Ernst Steinkellner, which also discusses the extent to which Frauwallner's racial views affected his scholarship.

has to explain this radical change in the nature of Indian philosophy as the victory of the non-Aryan essence over the dwindling strength of the Aryan spirit creative in the older systems …

Franco and Preisendanz point out that this same periodization is repeated several times, most recently in a publication of 1959, i.e. twenty years later.[2]

I guess it will be difficult to find scholars today who would not agree with Franco and Preisendanz when they say that "Frauwallner's claims are, to put it gently, not unproblematic".[3] I have yet referred to them because the idea that a number of dichotomies are at work in the history of Indian philosophy is not without appeal to me. These are not, however, Frauwallner's dichotomies. The opposition between Aryan and non-Aryan, most in particular, is racialist and, to quote once again Franco and Preisendanz, "morally despicable and factually wrong". I see other dichotomies, and I would like to discuss some of these, and see whether they have an incidence on the question of periodization.

The opposition between Buddhist and Brahmanical philosophies is well known and recognized. The interaction between these two currents is, for a major part of the history of Indian philosophy, one of its main intellectual driving forces. Thinkers from either side criticized the ideas of those belonging to the other side, who in turn attempted to answer these criticisms. I do not claim that there were only two parties involved: Brahmanical philosophers of one school might attack Brahmanical philosophers of another school, and the same is true for Buddhist thinkers. Moreover, also Jainism played its role in these encounters. The dichotomy Buddhism-Brahmanism was however predominant for a number of centuries, as it seems to me. Part of the reason is no doubt that Buddhists and Brahmins played different roles in society, and had often conflicting interests.

There is a different dichotomy, which for a number of centuries coincides with the Buddhism-Brahmanism dichotomy. It is the

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[2] In a letter to Walter Ruben dated 17 July 1968, Frauwallner wrote the following about his article from 1939: "Sie werden sehen, dass schon darin das Wesentliche über die Unterscheidung der verschiedenen Richtungen in der indischen Philosophie gesagt war" (Stuchlik 2009: 187).

[3] Jakob Stuchlik deals in full detail with the problematic side of Frauwallner's ideas; see Stuchlik 2009.

dichotomy of two kinds of ontologies: the ontologies which accord reality to the world of common experience, and those which don't. For a long time the Brahmanical philosophies belonged exclusively to the former category, the Buddhist philosophies to the latter. Is this coincidence? I have argued elsewhere that it is not,[4] and that the realistic tendency of Brahmanical philosophies was related to the fact that Brahmins – for reasons that cannot be discussed here – were much more involved in courtly life and policy decisions than Buddhists: a political counsellor is likely to loose much of his credibility if he maintains at the same time that the world of our every-day experience does not really exist. Of course, the appearance on the philosophical scene of Advaita Vedānta in the second half of the first millennium signalled the end of this ontological contrast between Buddhist and Brahmanical ontologies. It remains to be investigated whether and to what extent this change reflected a change in the social and perhaps political positions of Brahmins and Buddhists.

The importance of the Buddhism-Brahmanism dichotomy in the history of Indian philosophy is, as I said, well-known and generally recognized. It did not begin as a dichotomy. It seems clear that there was a time when only the Buddhists – or rather: some Buddhists – had elaborated a systematic ontology. This was the ontology that is part of what came to be known as Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma. This is the starting point of subsequent Buddhist philosophies, but also of Brahmanical and Jaina philosophies. This is clearly visible in the Brahmanical Vaiśeṣika ontology (and also in Jaina philosophy from canonical times onward; see Bronkhorst 1992 and Bronkhorst 2000). In other words, there was a time when, of the two legs of the Buddhism-Brahmanism dichotomy in philosophy, only one was as yet in existence, viz. Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma. The question as to how, when and why this Buddhist ontology was developed has been discussed elsewhere, and should not detain us here (see Bronkhorst 1999 and the expanded translation in Bronkhorst 2001).

There is another dichotomy to which I wish to draw attention. It is perhaps the most important of them all, though not as yet generally

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[4] In a paper called "Buddhist thought versus Brahmanical thought", read at the International Conference "World view and theory in Indian philosophy" held in Barcelona, 26-30 April 2009.

recognized (see Bronkhorst 2007a). It is the dichotomy between Vedic culture and the culture of the region to its east, which I call Greater Magadha. The most striking feature of the culture of Greater Magadha, at least for our present purposes, was its belief in rebirth and karmic retribution. This feature came to be adopted by Vedic culture, but this was a long drawn-out process, which took more than a thousand years to be completed. For Buddhism and Jainism, the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution was the point of departure. The best known Brahmanical ontologies of the early period – Vaiśeṣika and Sāṃkhya – also started from this belief, which had infiltrated into the Brahmanical circles that created them. These two philosophies can be best understood as ontological constructions created around the concept of a self that does not act; this is a key concept of the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution (in at least some of its manifestations). However, another Brahmanical ontology opposed this belief: the one known by the name of Cārvāka or Lokāyata. Also the school of Vedic hermeneutics known as Mīmāṃsā steered clear of the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution, at least until the middle of the first millennium CE. The original opposition between Vedic culture and the culture of Greater Magadha gave in this way rise to a different dichotomy: between those who accepted rebirth and karmic retribution, and those who didn't. This dichotomy did not coincide with the two dichotomies discussed so far: it split, for example, the ontologies that considered themselves Vedic into two: Vaiśeṣika and Sāṃkhya against Lokāyata (and Mīmāṃsā).

From an orthodox Vedic Brahmanical point of view, this last dichotomy was not very satisfactory. Both sides of the dichotomy and indeed each of these three ontologies (or four, if you insist on including early Mīmāṃsā) left much to be desired.

Consider Vaiśeṣika and Sāṃkhya. Their link with the Vedic tradition is not very close. The influence of the Sarvāstivāda ontology on Vaiśeṣika is clear, and Sāṃkhya has a number of characteristics that seem to betray the influence it underwent from the culture of Greater Magadha. Perhaps most importantly, these two ontologies are built around a kernel – the notion of an inactive self, a notion inseparable from the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution – that they had borrowed from that culture. Philosophically inclined defenders of the Vedic tradition – including its rejection of rebirth

and karmic retribution – were almost forced to opt for Lokāyata or Mīmāṃsā.

However, these two were not ideal either. It appears that the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution had proven unstoppable. The Lokāyata school – which came to lose all of its appeal presumably because on the one hand it rejected rebirth and karmic retribution, and on the other it had no close link with the Vedic corpus of texts – disappeared toward the end of the first millennium. Mīmāṃsā did survive, but opened up to the new belief. Bhartṛhari was perhaps the first to come up with a new ontology explicitly based on the Veda. Most striking is the appearance of schools of Vedānta on the philosophical scene. These schools combined all that orthodox Brahmins valued: they claimed to be mere schools of Vedic interpretation (considering themselves forms of Mīmāṃsā, see Bronkhorst 2007b), yet combined respect for the Vedic corpus with belief in rebirth and karmic retribution, which they presented as fundamental to the teaching of the Veda.

What can these reflections about dichotomies in the Indian systematic ontologies tell us about periodization? Interestingly, and ironically, they suggest something that looks very much like the *opposite* of what Frauwallner proposed. Frauwallner proposed, by and large, a division of the history of Indian philosophy into two: an Aryan period followed by a non-Aryan period. We may abandon the word "Aryan", with its racial overtones, and replace it with "Vedic" which emphasizes cultural rather than racial traits. Our series of dichotomies suggests (again in the broadest of terms) that, at least within the Brahmanical tradition, a non-Vedic period of ontology was followed by a Vedic one. Let me explain.

The earliest systematic ontology in India, I submit, was non-Vedic: it was the Buddhist Sarvāstivāda ontology (or its predecessor, if there was one). The Vedic tradition came up with ontologies of its own, to be sure, but these attempts were reactive, and had nothing specifically Vedic to them: Vaiśeṣika and Sāṃkhya took the non-Vedic notion of rebirth and karmic as core-doctrine (and borrowed also in other respects from those they disagreed with), and Lokāyata was primarily characterized by its denial of this doctrine. Mīmāṃsā did not develop an ontology of its own until later.

This defensive character of the Vedic attempts at ontology did not really change until the second half of the first millennium CE, when Mīmāṃsā took a more ontological turn and various schools of Vedānta joined the philosophical debate. It is true that these new developments within the Vedic tradition accepted rebirth and karmic retribution, like Vaiśeṣika and Sāṃkhya before them, but they were emphatic in claiming that they were philosophies based on the Veda or even, in the case of Vedānta, philosophies contained in the Veda.

In spite of all the differences, we too end up with an understanding of the history of Indian philosophy (or rather: Indian ontology) in which there is a change of some importance around the middle of the first millennium. At that time the ontologically creative phase of most of the classical schools slows down, and makes place for new developments, also in the ontological (or perhaps rather: metaphysical) realm, of Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta in its various manifestations. This transition is all the more remarkable in that one of the new Brahmanical schools – Advaita Vedānta – deviated from the Brahmanical philosophical tradition as it had been so far by postulating that the world of our ordinary experience is not real. We know that Śaṅkara was accused by some of his fellow-Brahmins of being a crypto-Buddhist, but this does not change the fact that in the long run his philosophy became more popular than any of the others. And yet, as I suggested earlier, Brahmins had so far been bound to a realistic philosophy because of the role they played in society, and particularly at and around the royal court.

These and other factors suggest that changes in the philosophical realm were connected with changes in the socio-political realm. It may be a task for future research to clarify the relationship between these two realms. As a matter of fact, Vincent Eltschinger has – in a paper ("Apocalypticism, heresy and philosophy: towards a socio-historically grounded account of sixth century Indian philosophy") that has not yet been published, and again in his contribution to this panel – drawn attention to the fact that in Brahmanical apocalyptic eschatology the negative role of Buddhists is emphasized from the end of Gupta rule in northern India onward. The opposition between Buddhists and Brahmins appears to have become much fiercer from that time onward, and finds increasingly expression in the surviving philosophical literature and in accounts of public debates that opposed representatives of these two. It may here also be recalled

that Tantrism started becoming important soon after the middle of the first millennium. The social, political, and in the end philosophical consequences of these and other developments need further study, and I will say no more about them here.

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