Vedas and *Upaniṣad*

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Chapter Summary

This chapter[1] explores the role of evil in the development of the Vedas and *Upaniṣad*s. The Vedas and the *Upaniṣad*s, or the Vedas (collectively) are the repository of *veda* (literally, "knowledge") of the early Indo-European peoples of South Asia. Written and collected over a thousand-year period, from 1500 BCE to 500 BCE, the Vedas says many things about evil. However, the corpus presents a philosophical shift from naturalism to non-naturalism (and a corresponding shift from consequentialism to deontology). The problem with naturalism on the Vedic reckoning is that it renders evil an ineliminable primitive that motivates a devotion to naturalistic forces to maximise good results. Non-naturalism, rooted in the idea of self-development, treats evil as an inessential malady of self-governance. On the latter account, evil plays no essential role in self-understanding, and can be eliminated by self-governance.

> *Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant saying "yes" to itself, slave morality says "no" on principle to everything that is "outside", "other", "non-self ": and this "no" is its creative deed. This reversal of the evaluating glance – this essential orientation to the outside instead of back onto itself – is a feature of ressentiment: in order to come about, slave morality first has to have an opposing, external world, it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all, – its action is basically a reaction. The*

[1] This chapter has benefited from feedback from Ajay Rao and Chandan Narayan.

opposite is the case with the noble method of valuation… Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality* (1994: 20)

The Vedas are a body of literature of the ancient South Asian, Indo-European peoples. The corpus itself was written over a long stretch of time: 1500 BCE to 500 BCE. It has conventionally been divided into four Vedas (*Ṛg*, *Yajur*, *Sāman* and *Arthavan*) and each Veda is often divided into four portions: Formulas (Mantras), Ritual Manuals (*Brāhmaṇa*s), Forest Books (*Āraṇyaka*) and Dialogues (*Upaniṣad*s).[2] "Veda" when not employed as a term for the whole, denotes the first three, to the exclusion of the Dialogues. The four Vedas themselves overlap, though there are some differences in theme. The mantra portions of the *Ṛg*, *Yajur* and *Sāman* consist of hymns to and accounts of the various Nature deities, many of which are to be employed in sacrifices, while the *Arthavan* is a collection of spells and cures. Whereas the *Brāhmaṇa*s specify the practical aim and procedures of the sacrifice, the *Āraṇyaka*s treat the sacrifice as a model for something else–often self-reflection. The school of thought founded on these earlier portions is known as Pūrva Mīmāṃsā (literally, "the interpretation of the former").

The Dialogues (*Upaniṣad*s) solidify a shift in focus (cf. Santucci 1976). Whereas the previous portions of the Vedas focus on the various gods and fortuitous relations to them, the dialogues shift to the relationship between the self (*Ātmā*) and Development or Growth (Brahman).[3] The *Upaniṣad*s present

[2] The *Upaniṣad*s can be found in Max Müller's historic translations, listed in the bibliography under a single entry. The value of these translations is that they are available free online. There are other more recent online sources, listed in the "Further Readings" section.

[3] The *Monier Monier Williams Sanskrit English Dictionary* gives many interpretations of "Brahman". The first interpretations are: "growth", "expansion", "evolution" and "development." (Monier-Williams 1995: 737-8).

Development as the primary divinity, and often identify it with the Self. The school of thought based on the *Upaniṣad*s is known as Vedānta (lit., "the end of the Vedas").

There are two monographs available in English that touch upon what this very large body of literature has to say about evil. The first is Wendy Doniger's *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Doniger 1976). This book continues past the Vedas and ranges over subsequent literature in the Hindu tradition. But it does offer useful characterisations of the Vedic accounts of evil. Doniger notes that the Vedic term for evil is *pāpa* (lit. "fault"). On her account, the Vedas understand evil in the moral sense: "people are evil-minded; adultery is evil; incest is evil" (Doniger 1976: 7). Hunger too is an evil, she notes (Doniger 1976: 30). On Doniger's view, the Vedic orientation is towards avoiding illness (Doniger 1976: 375).

Then there is the more focused (and earlier) book by the Swedish Indologist, Sten Olof Rodhe, titled *Deliver us from Evil: Studies on the Vedic Ideas of Salvation* (1946). This latter work is written from a Christian perspective that treats the Biblical prayer, "deliver us from evil", as a central concern of the Vedas. Like Doniger after him, Rodhe notes that the Vedas conceptualise evil in moral terms: "*pāpa* and *pāpman* are used throughout the Veda in order to indicate various evils" (Rodhe 1946: 36). "*Pāpa*" is *prima facie* a term of moral criticism. Yet Rodhe sees a pattern in the usage of these terms: "[l]ife is good, everything that threatens it is evil, *pāpman"* (Rodhe 1946: 33). Death, on this account, is evil.

One problem in attempting to answer the question of what the Vedas have to say about evil is that the question assumes that there is some finite or clear thesis about evil present in the literature. A review of the secondary literature mentioned so far presents a corpus that identifies evil with both vice and natural misfortune. This already exhausts many of the possibilities. Moreover, as the corpus of Vedic

texts is vast, especially when we count the *Upaniṣad*s, it may not be very easy to say with any certainty what the Vedic thesis of evil is. Indeed, there may be no single thesis, and what we might find is a vast collection of differing perspectives on evil in the Vedic literature. Add to this the historical reality that the Vedas took millennia to form, and it becomes less certain that there is any single theme of evil in the Vedas.

However, if we treat the topic of evil as a constant, we can thereby discern the changes in the dialectic of the Vedas as a critical meditation on evil. Read this way, the Vedas and *Upaniṣad*s present us with a dialectic that

> FIRST explores a naturalistic approach to evil as something to be avoided by appeasing the appropriate natural forces, but gives way to a
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> SECOND non-natural approach to evil as a non-necessary failure of self-mastery.

By "naturalistic" I mean the word in the sense that it is employed in the metaethical literature to denote theories of value that treat moral properties (such as good and evil) as a function of natural properties. In the Vedic version of naturalism, the natural properties that support moral value are the forces of nature. I likewise mean "non-naturalism" in the way that it is employed in this literature to understand moral properties as irreducible to natural properties. In the Vedic version of non-naturalism, moral properties are not reducible to the forces of nature.

On the first approach in the Vedas, the goods that we desire are defined in contrast to evils. Evil functions as our motivation to strive for goodness: it structures the rationale for our choices. If *ressentiment* is the identification of

goods in terms of evils (*Genealogy of Morality*: xxv, 20), the former approach of the Vedas promotes a system of *ressentiment* that can at best keep evil at bay, but does not eliminate it from one's outlook. Evil resides in this cosmology as so many demons (*rākṣasas*) that must be given their due in order to make sense of the good life. According to the second approach, evil is a function of the failure to affirm our autonomy. On this account, evil plays no essential role in self-understanding, and can be eliminated via responsible living.

This shift from naturalism to non-naturalism is part of a theoretical move from consequentialism to deontology. The school of philosophy that codifies the Vedic shift from naturalism to non-naturalism–and away from *ressentiment*– is Yoga. To understand the Vedic to *Upaniṣad*ic shifts on evil is to understand Yoga.

Vedic Naturalism

If we include the chants about the gods and the literature on how to sacrifice to them in the first part of the Vedas, and the *Upaniṣad* discussions of the Self (*Ātmā*) and Development (*Brahman*) in the later part of the Vedas, we arrive at the traditional division. According to this division, the former part is concerned with action (karma), while the latter is concerned with knowledge or insight (*jñāna*).

The focus of the active or practical part of the Vedas consists in rituals aimed at appeasing deities. Many of the deities of the Vedas are like the deities of other early Indo-European cultures. They are objects or forces of nature: planets, the elements, stars. The hymns often praise one deity, or group of deities, as supreme. A theme in these hymns is the motivation to avoid *some* evil by seeking the blessings of deities. The mantra section of the *Ṛg Veda* is filled with consecutive prayers for protection against social evils brought about by demons (*rākṣasa*) (*Ṛg Veda* 1.21, 10.87) and humans who break contracts and friendships

(*Ṛg Veda* 10.88). The hymns betray a concern for the welfare of cattle, threatened by poisons (*Ṛg Veda*, 6.28, 10.88). The evils that the Vedas describe undermine our security and good fortune, and the security and good fortune of those who depend on us.

As the *Brāhmaṇa*s report, ritual is the means of gaining the support of the gods and warding off evil. How could such influence work? If evil is the lack of flourishing, then appeasing natural forces–the gods–helps us flourish. This knowledge is commonplace in our worldview: if we want to flourish, we have to be mindful of natural requirements. Vedic ritual is an appeal to this practical knowledge. Hence, when we are hungry, we must eat. Eating requires the appropriation of the body of some other living organism. In appropriating this body for ourselves, we pay a debt to the natural forces. This allows us the nourishment we require to flourish.

According to the *Aitaraya Brāhmaṇa* the key to actualising this flourishing is a discrimination between sacrifice and victim. This discrimination requires a certain moral sensitivity. For instance, the presiding priests at the end of an animal sacrifice must mutter "O Slaughterers! may all good you might do abide by us! and all mischief you might do go elsewhere". This counts as the order for killing the sacrificial animal. But this appreciation of the difference between the requirements of sacrifice and the general mischief of slaughter removes the fault or guilt of those who kill the animal. Whereas the ordinary torture of innocent animals is wrong, a sacrifice to the gods is no ordinary torture, and is permissible (cf. Śaṅkara (Ādi) 1983: III.i.25; cf. Rāmānuja 1996: III.i.25). This knowledge allows the presiding priest to enjoy the flourishing made possible by the sacrifice (*Aitaraya Brāhmaṇa* 2.1.7, p. 61).

But why is it that there must be a sacrificial animal that is non-human? We humans arguably make just as good a meal as a goat. The Vedic texts answer that

in the first instance, humans are the sacrificial objects for gods. Yet things change once gods dissect a human. They find that part of the human that is fit for being the object of sacrifice is converted into a horse (quick-moving). But the same is true of the horse: having killed the horse, the gods discover that the part worthy of being sacrificed is now an ox (slower-moving). Each time a new convention is set up for who is to be sacrificed, until a strange turn of events occurred: the part worthy of sacrifice turns into rice, and that is where it ends (*Aitaraya Brāhmaṇa* 2.1.8, pp. 61-2).

This certainly mirrors a shift from meat to a vegetarian diet. But these progressive shifts consist in a distinction between two parts of an organic being: the part that can be food, and the part that cannot. If the part of the being that can function as food is the flesh, then the part that cannot function as food grounds the interest the being has in avoiding death. This is something that we animals share. Yet we find that the bifurcation of the organic being in terms of natural attributes (flesh) and personal interests (in avoiding death) seems not to apply to the rice plant, according to the Vedas. But why?

If death is the ultimate loss of autonomy and self-direction, plant-thriving is bound up with death insofar as plant health requires being non-autonomous with respect to the ground it is rooted in, and the environment it is stuck in. The conditions of health for a plant would spell death for an animal. But this means that given the idea that death is the loss of autonomy, animals have an interest in avoiding death but plants do not. This means that plants seemingly have no part that cannot serve as food for sacrifice. So, it stops with rice. Plants can thrive, but their thriving is death. Animal thriving in contrast is inimical to death. One might respond that this analysis shows only that the conditions of thriving for plants is inadequate for animals. But the point is stronger: the conditions for thriving for plants is unhealthy for animals. If death as a public event is the loss of autonomy

and self-direction of some entity, then plants apparently require this to be healthy, while this would be the demise of an animal. (Correlatively: death is not the same as a failure to thrive. It is a failure to be autonomous and self directing.)

Animals hence have two aspects to themselves: we must eat (to appease the gods), but we have an interest in avoiding being eaten, for to be eaten is to die. Yet we too make good meat, so we are vulnerable to being someone else's lunch. Why is it that animals are under this pressure to appease the gods? According to the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, it is Agni (fire) that is the consumer of food (I.1.2.ii). The sacrificial offering just is food (I.1.4,vii). If it is ultimately fire that is hungry, and the sacrifice is how we enact feeding our debt to fire, then the sacrifice is the ritualisation of metabolism: the burning of calories. The sacrifice hence functions as a model for our animal biology. It is also the uneasy legitimisation of the appropriation of some other living body for our ends.

Vedic Non-Naturalism: Life after Death

Trying to avoid death by sacrifice to the gods does not work in the long run. Worse, the evils that we want to avoid by appealing to the gods do not disappear from view because we sacrifice. Every day, we must feed the gods to maintain our health and avoid illness. Worse, evil motives are not placated by sacrifice. The *Brāhmaṇa* quoted already notes that during the course of a sacrifice, the blood of the victim should be offered to evil demons (*rākṣasa*s). The reason? By offering blood to the demons, we keep the nourishing portion of the sacrifice for ourselves (*Aitaraya Brāhmaṇa* 2.1.7, pp. 59-60). But this is an admission that appeasing the gods of nature is part of a system of *ressentiment*, where we must understand the goods in life as definable in relation to evils we want to avoid.

In the famous *Kaṭha Upaniṣad***,** we find that the young boy Nachiketa is condemned to death by his father (conducting a solemn sacrifice to the gods) in response to the boy's pestering question: "to whom will you sacrifice me?" "To death" is uttered by his father–in irritation. But it is in an official context. So the boy is sacrificed, and travels to the abode of the God of Death, Yama, who is absent. Upon returning after three days, Yama offers the young boy three boons to make up for his lack of hospitality. Two boons are readily granted: the first is returning to his father, and the second is knowledge of a sacrifice that leads to the high-life. Last, Nachiketa wants to know: what happens to a person after they die– do they cease to exist, or do they exist? Yama tries to avoid answering this question by offering wealth–money, progeny, and the diversions of privilege. Nachiketa rejects this, on the grounds that "no one can be made happy in the long run by wealth," and "no one can take it with them when they come to you [i.e. Death]." He objects that such gifts are short-lived. Death is inevitable, so he wants the answer. The boy is persistent and Yama relents. He begins his response by praising the boy for understanding the difference between the *śreya* (control) and *pre-ya* (literally "advance-movement", i.e., utility, the offering for or gain of the sacrifice): the foolish are concerned with the *preya* (what Yama tried to give the boy), but the wise with control.

Yama continues with his *allegory of the chariot*.[4] According to Yama, the body is like a Chariot in which the Self sits. The intellect (*buddhi*) is like the

[4] Philosophy is filled with interesting allegories of the chariot: all proving something different. Whereas Death employs the allegory to show that there is a self distinct from the mind, body, senses and intellect, the Buddhist *Questions of King Malinda* (*Milindapañha*) argues the opposite: no such self is to be found, if we take the chariot as the allegory for the self. Plato uses the model to explicate the nature of the soul. All souls are comprised of a charioteer and winged horses. The charioteer (the person) is the intellect, but the characters of the horses differ. Gods

charioteer. The senses (*indriya*) are like horses, and the mind (*mānasa*) is the reins. The Enjoyer is the union of the self, senses, mind and intellect. The objects of the senses are like the roads that the chariot travels. People of poor understanding do not take control of their horses (the senses) with their mind (the reins). Rather, they let their senses draw them to objects of desire, leading them to ruin. According to Yama, the person with understanding reins in the senses with the mind and intellect (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* I.2). This is (explicitly called) Yoga (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.6). Those who practise yoga reach their Self in a final place of security (Vishnu's abode).[5] This is the place of the Great Self (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* I.3). There is no evil here.

The story is noteworthy for a number of reasons. First, the young boy, far from natural death, has to confront Death ahead of time. And whereas typically the point of sacrifice to the gods is to avoid problems of misfortune that tend towards one's own death (by finding a suitable proxy who is then sacrificed), the boy himself is the sacrificial victim. But having been deprived of his autonomy by this untimely death, he has an audience with Death, not as one who suffers the misfortunes of Death, but as one who is honoured with gifts from Death. The gifts given by Death to the one who faces Him ahead of time not only includes a restoration of relationships with loved ones, and an understanding of the sacrifices necessary for the high-life, but also the secret of life: death (the loss of autonomy) as an event (which we call dying) only occurs to those who do not take control of their senses, mind and intellect. Those who can take control of these elements, and

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have noble horses, while humans are stuck with one good horse, and one troublesome horse (*Phaedrus* 246a–54e).

[5] Vishnu is the deity of preservation. In Hindu lore, his consort is depicted as Bhumi Devi: Mother Earth. To go the realm of Vishnu is to be never far from Earth.

thereby control their body, are responsible agents avoiding accidents. This is what it is to face Death ahead of time: it is to live life in the knowledge of the possibility of dying, and thereby to avoid dying. Death ahead of time is life after Death (though not life after dying). This is Yoga.

There is a long tradition of interpreting the *Upaniṣad*s as teaching a mysterious doctrine about a non-empirical self. It is often couched in the Judaeo-Christian language of being chosen by a God. Just as God chooses his people, the *ātmā*, we are told, chooses a person (cf. Müller's translation of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* I.2.23-5):

> That Self cannot be gained by the Veda, nor by understanding, nor by much learning. He whom the Self chooses, by him the Self can be gained. The Self chooses him (his body) as his own. But he who has not first turned away from his wickedness, who is not tranquil, and subdued, or whose mind is not at rest, he can never obtain the Self (even) by knowledge! "Who then knows where He is, He to whom the Brahmans and Kshatriyas are (as it were) but food, and death itself a condiment?"

This translation consists of distortions, including the gratuitous insertion of "Veda". Worse, it makes the issue occult. The doctrine becomes unmysterious if we have a taste for moral philosophy. For the topic is ethical. To understand oneself is to understand oneself as responsible for oneself. This is Death's lesson.

Here we come upon an insight of the Vedic tradition. We need to do something with Death– (i.e. the loss of autonomy). If we do not take control of our loss of autonomy, we lose our autonomy. The earlier Vedic tradition thought that the way to remove it from the public realm (our death, or loss of autonomy) is to inflict it on another. But the later view is that to take control over the loss of

autonomy is for us to take it away from the public realm (what we can all see), where it is a threat, and privately house it as a loss of autonomy (where it is not visible to others). The private housing of a loss of autonomy is the loss of autonomy to oneself: self-governance or self-control. This is a self-imposed limitation on our person, that is, our public freedom. For this reason, the Indian tradition has often connected Death with Duty. Indeed, the latter tradition identifies the God of Death as Dharma (Duty, Virtue). Reciprocally, the tradition also calls Death by the same term it uses for ethical responsibility, direction, or self-control: *yama*. To understand the self via *yama* is to take hold of the public freedom for us to be ourselves, by privately limiting ourselves. This is to understand the self *prescriptively* in terms of what it ought to do, and not in terms of what it contingently does. So Death concludes:

> This self is not obtained by speech, nor by intellect, nor by much revelations about sacrifices (*śruti*). He or she whom the Self chooses, gains him or herself. Deliberately choosing the self (*ātmā vi-vṛṇute*) is governing oneself (*tanum svam*) verily (*am*). One who has not first turned away from evil policies (*duścara*), who is not peaceful and subdued, or whose mind is not at rest, can never obtain the Self by insight! Such a confused one will not know where the Self went–The self for whom privilege (Brahmins [the priestly caste] and Kṣatriyas [the governing caste]) is the main course, and death the sauce. (My translation, *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* I.2.23-5).

To attain the self is to be the master of one's own destiny. But autonomy is only possible for one who has shaken off evil, for so long as we rely upon evil, we rely upon excuses for our problems. Understanding the self is seeing through the social

order of privilege that depicts people–including those who officiate sacrifices such as Brahmins and those who commission them such as Kṣatriyas–in terms of social status. The real self is prior to that, and treats superficial features of life (such as social privilege) as food to be relished with death! The underlying logic is clear: privilege that supports the consequence oriented paradigm of sacrifice that sees some as the beneficiaries and others as the victim is not a function of self-governance but accidents of birth, and is hence to be reduced.

According to Death's teaching, evil is an accidental misfortune of self-direction. It is not a demon or a thing waiting in the dark. Death can teach us this, for Death is the accident we want to avoid by taking control of the loss of autonomy. Knowing Death consists in keeping our distance from dying, and this is a matter of self-respect as self-control.

The account of evil presented by Death is analogous to the idea that evil is a deprivation of goodness, insofar as we start not with evil as a primitive, but something positive. Accordingly, "Creation exists because it is good, and evil is in some respects a privation or deforming of what is good. Goodness is antecedent to evil historically and metaphysically " (Taliaferro 2015: 3). There are portions of the *Upaniṣad*s that sound like this. For instance, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.2.1 states that priority is to be given to *sat* (reality, but also the good) from which all arose. But this is not the final word on the issue, for Death eliminates talk of goodness in favour of control (*śreya*) and self-governance (*tanuṃsvam*). Whereas goodness is an outcome or state of affairs, self-governance is the condition of outcomes and states of affairs. To countenance ourselves as essentially self-governing is to treat ourselves as the explanation of good and evil. Evil arises from irresponsibility (failed practice, *duścara*). It is not an explanatory primitive of our universe. But neither is goodness basic, if the right is prior to the good and it is our righteous

behaviour that explains the good. So, evil is a privation of rightness–not goodness–on the yogic model.

The Philosophy of Yoga

According to the school of philosophy called Yoga–codified by Patañjali, 200 CE– reality is explicable by two metaphysical principles: causality/efficacy (*guṇa* YS II.19, *prakṛti āpūrāt* YS IV.2), and normative concepts of formal and practical rationality, such as abstraction, isolation, autonomy (*kaivalya,* YS II.25), self-mastery (*sva-svāmi,* YS II.23), and authentic living (*svarūpe avasthānam* –abiding in one's own form, YS I.2, *svarūpa-pratiṣṭhā* –standing on one's form YS IV.34). When things go poorly, nature is called upon as an explanation. When things go well, it is personal determination that explains life. Ideally, we ought to isolate ourselves from natural influences. This process of isolation involves the discernment of cosmic moral laws (*Ṛta*) and the clearing of nature to facilitate a personal world, safe for people who have an interest in self-direction and abstraction (YS I.47-51).

Self-actualisation and autonomy are earned, on this account, when people can put critical distance between themselves and mental content, which just is public content. The practice of criticism is the practice of yoga. When people can practise criticism, they put distance between themselves and objects in the world that would otherwise be their downfall. In the case of mental illness, we cure ourselves when we can put some distance between ourselves and our thoughts and feelings. In the case of physical illness, we can cure ourselves, too, if we put some distance between ourselves and our pathogens.

Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra* depicts moral evil as natural evil. The justification for this identification comes from the explanatory dualism of Yoga that pits nature

against people. The inauthentic life constitutes an incursion of nature in to the life of the sovereign person. Natural evil undermines autonomy: it is death as dying. But moral evil is nothing but the failure to respect the autonomy of individuals: it is hence of a piece with natural evil. When people act as though they are vicious, and it seems as though there is no natural explanation, we must think again. For moral evil in the form of cruelty, or lack of consideration for others, is a function of habituated incursions into autonomy. The yogi diagnoses those who are morally evil as confused, and responds by fortifying their own self-governance. This has the effect of disarming the ill (YS II.33-5).

The shift from natural explanation to moral or personal explanation is the job of yogic practice. To this end, the *Yoga Sūtra* catalogues all the things one can do with oneself. Indeed, along the way, one can even amass great powers, by being an astute student and manipulator of nature (YS III). But Patañjali cautions the yogi: such gifts are a diversion from the practice of yoga (YS III.38). Our ultimate goal is autonomy (*kaivalya*), but we cannot accomplish this without renouncing selfish desires in all contexts. To hold onto a selfish desire is to see things in consequential terms, where we look at the project of life as gaining what we do not have. The opposite is appropriate: we ought to view life as the project of gaining what we have: ourselves. To renounce all selfish desires results in a *dharmameghasamādhi:* (absorption in a raincloud of virtue) that washes away all that is extraneous to the self (YS IV.29).

The standard reading of the Vedas from the Indian tradition treats them as comprised of two components: a component concerned with ritual, and a component concerned with knowledge of the Self, and Development. But when we look at the Vedas as a meditation on evil, it is the philosophy of Yoga worked out in detail. The gods are the forces of Nature, and they compete as an explanation with the Self. Opting for personal explanations requires getting rid of natural

explanations for problems. The move away from the natural towards the personal is to move away from assessing life in terms of outcomes (from the outside), and towards assessing life in terms of self-governance and autonomy. This is the *yogic turn* in the Vedic corpus that takes evil out of the picture.

Self-Governance v. Orientalism

It the account that I have defended is correct, the Vedas document a critical approach to evil that developed over time. The first stage is Consequentialist. The motive for action is to avoid evil and to gain good. The methodology consists of appeasing forces of nature. A philosophical dissatisfaction with this methodology, that enshrines evil as an ontological primitive, is the backdrop for a move towards a deontological approach, where good and evil are functions of choice, and are not ontological primitives. The world is not evil on this approach, any more than it is good: evil and good are functions of personal responsibility. Yet on the popular Orientalist accounts, the Vedic account of evil is forever stuck at the first stage, and never moves to reducing evil to questions of personal responsibility.

In the humanities, "Orientalism" has come to denote a patronising attitude towards the East. Accordingly, the East gets cast as underdeveloped (Said 1978; Inden 1990). Orthodox views of South Asia are in many cases Orientalist. The prime example of this attitude is the notion that Indian thinkers were not particularly interested in ethics or moral philosophy (Ranganathan 2007). This is an unsurprising attitude, given that South Asia was under colonial domination when many of these views were developed: it does not suit the view of the coloniser to depict the colonised as free-thinking and critical– especially about evil. The idea that a basic South Asian approach to evil in the Vedas hinges on the question of self-governance is threatening to Orientalism and a colonialist agenda

that would sooner depict South Asians in need of management so as to maximize outcomes, and not as people who are concerned about self-governance. Yet we find in scholarship ways to minimize the importance of self-governance in an Indic account of evil.

One way to suppress the matter of self-governance in Indian accounts of evil is to selectively rely upon Nietzsche.

According to Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality*, what we normally call “morality” (social rules of reciprocity, and a concern to avoid suffering) is socially constructed under conditions of social oppression. Nietzsche calls this "slave morality". The problem with slave morality is that it is *resentful* : it understands the goods in life in opposition to a whole host of evils that are forced on a slavish population by oppressors. This creates conditions for philosophy (criticism) and asceticism (denial of pleasures) as further exercises in *ressentiment* (*Genealogy*: 84) . On Nietzsche's account, an ethical theory (such as Utilitarianism) that seeks to avoid natural evils and maximise benefits is also a version of the same type of theory. The movement away from Vedic naturalism, which defines goods in opposition to evils that we wish to avoid, is the movement away from being *resentful*. In keeping with Nietzsche's characterisation of non-slave, “master” morality as the morality that looks inwards towards the self, the Vedic move away from *ressentiment* consists in affirming the Self as the explanation for the moral life. The Vedas may hence have been a perfect model for Nietzschean reflections on the way morality goes wrong, and how it goes well. Or conversely, Nietzsche's *Genealogy* may be highly derivative from this earlier thought-experiment of the Vedas. In praising the Vedic thought-experiment on evil as showing how to renounce *ressentiment* by deference to the self, we are not so much complimenting Nietzsche as the Vedic tradition for its critical exploration of the topic of evil (that

predates Nietzsche by two millennia). New ideas in the West are often old ideas in the East.[6]

Yet the Vedic solution in the *Upaniṣad*s is reputed to involve asceticism by way of the criticism of offerings and gains of sacrifice–i.e. utility (*preya*). Worse, according to Nietzsche, asceticism is *resentful*. This would render the *Upaniṣad*s an exercise in *resentment,* which involves taking evil seriously as an ontological primitive necessary for the justification of the moral life. If asceticism amounts to immaturity in moral development (the kind that requires a coloniser's intervention to manage outcomes of the colonized), *Upaniṣad*ic ethics would thereby be immature–not to mention resentful. This depiction of Eastern thought as immature is Orientalism. Something must be wrong.

The ascetic reading of Indian thought and the *Upaniṣad*s is old hat in the Western commentarial tradition. For some, such as Schopenhauer, the asceticism of Indian thought is attractive. On his derivative account from the *Upaniṣads* and Indian thought, life experiences are characterised by *māyā* (Sanskrit for illusion) that leads us to believe in our phenomenal individuality, as opposed to our noumenal unity. This supports an ethical self-centredness that leads to suffering. We should rather deny our individuality, and hence take an interest in the suffering of others as our own suffering. But on this score, we ascetically criticise sense-experience as deceptive (*World as Will and Idea,* 471-2).

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[6] Ideas that are old in the West can be new in the East too. One prime example is the importance given to temple idol worship in Indian practices. While originally Hellenic (Brown 1940: 40) and Persian, and traditionally looked down upon by Brahminical orthodoxy as foreign to ancient practices (Olivelle 2010), idol temple worship has become synonymous with popular Hinduism and has been roundly affirmed by modern, Brahminical purveyors of Hindu "orthodoxy" (e.g., *smārta*-s). Recent scholarship on Indic temples has not done anything to unseat the late date of the Hindu temple (Meister 2010, 1983). Hindu temples with idol worship appear to be a largely late phenomena of the common era.

Others disagree that asceticism makes Indian thought attractive. Albert Schweitzer, often praised for his philosophy of "reverence of life" and lauded as a moralist, is famous for an explicitly Orientalist criticism of Indian thought. According to Schweitzer,

> We know very little about any thought except our own, especially about Indian thought. The reason why it is so difficult to become familiar with this is that Indian thought in its very nature is so entirely different from our own because of the great part which the idea of what is called world and life negation plays in it. Whereas our modern European world-view (*Weltanschauung*), like that of Zarathustra and the Chinese thinkers, is on principle world and life affirming. (Schweitzer 1936: 1)

According to Schweitzer, the *Upaniṣad*s teach this criticisable Schopenhauerian doctrine, but with a Platonic (or Neo-Platonic) twist. This is the idea that our personal identity consists in our soul or mind. Brahman, in turn, is depicted as the Universal Soul (Schweitzer 1936: 35-6). In affirming this universal soul, we apparently deny the world and its variegation (that is, we regard it as evil), but affirm what is in each one of us. Here we find some defence of Indian thought against Nietzsche:

> Compared with the Brahmanic superman, Nietzsche's is a miserable creature. The Brahmanic superman is exalted above the whole universe, Nietzsche's merely over human society. (Schweitzer 1936: 36)

But this is a backhanded compliment, for in essence:

> The result of the freedom of the soul from the world of sense, as preached by Brahmanic mysticism, is that man has to pass his life completely detached from all that is earthly. His thoughts must be entirely directed to the world of pure Being. (Schweitzer 1936: 36)

If this gloss is correct, the *Upaniṣad*s regard the Earth and the sensible world as an evil to be avoided by fleeing to another world of "pure Being." The idea that Indian thought teaches that life is an evil to be avoided is a common myth.

There are countless errors in these glosses. But most intriguing is the Platonistic gloss on the teachings of the *Upaniṣad*s. According to this gloss, the *Upaniṣad*'s self (*ātmā*) is the soul. Brahman is the world soul or pure Being, and the mystical identity of the self and the world-soul is the liberating knowledge that takes us away from the particulars of our life to the universals. Such a gloss renders the *Upaniṣad*'s teachings a form of Neo-Platonism (cf. *The Enneads*, IV.3.17). Nowhere does this tendency to confuse Platonism, or Neo-Platonism with the philosophy of the *Upaniṣad*s come to a head more clearly than in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* we have examined. Whereas for Plato's *Republic*, the soul (comprised of appetite, spirit and reason) is the self, and whereas for the *Phaedrus* the soul is the collection of the charioteer (the intellect or reason), who in the human case must control two troublesome horses (apparently corresponding to desire and spirit),[7] Death teaches us that the self is separate from the mind, intellect and senses–all the things that could comprise the soul. Indeed, while the three portions that Death critically distinguishes from the self mirror in some respects the three parts of the soul Plato identifies, Death is keen to distinguish the self from the soul. The doctrine being taught here, explicitly, is the doctrine of Yoga: we are

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[7] See note 4.

kaivalya–autonomy, abstraction, isolation. Our interests consist in being critical of thought – and anything under our control, including our intellect–so that we may "abide in our own essence" (YS I.2). Failure to be critical results in the identification with thought (YS I.3), which in the model of the chariot is tantamount to driving into a ditch. On this account, we are not defined by our character, or capacities that ought to serve our interests (capacities such as appetite, spirit and intellect) but by our *interest* in negotiating experiences unscathed. Each individual is one who has this interest in surviving their life. This interest in escaping danger never changes, and is a constant: we are norms or values of survival, not minds (souls) or bodies. Self-governance is about getting these different aspects of our life to respect our essence as abstract. This is to steer clear of the ditch. The Earth is not an evil we are trying to move away from on this account, but a good that we live with so long as we take responsibility for avoiding the creation of evil by careless driving.

The inclination to interpret the *Upaniṣad*s as teaching something Platonic or Neo-Platonic extends to traditional interpretations of the text. When Death is impressed by Nachiketa's wisdom, he praises him by distinguishing between *śreya* (control) and *preya* (offering), saying that the wise choose the former while the foolish the latter. It is not uncommon to see Death (in English translation) praising the boy for distinguishing between the *good* and the *pleasurable*[8]–a distinction that resonates with Plato's philosophy in the *Republic*, where the Good is the light of reason, and pleasure is what the appetites crave. If this Platonic gloss is what the *Upaniṣad*s recommend, this is asceticism. This would support Schweitzer's

[8] I find this also in the excellent *A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy* (Grimes 1996), not to mention translations such as Müller's. The term "*śreya*" is peculiar to the Vedic-Sanskrit of the *Upaniṣad*s. It is not part of scholastic Sanskrit of the common era. The closest Sanskrit term to it is "*śrāya*"— "protection". This is close to what Death appears to mean by "*śreya*".

contention that Indian thought regards life and the world as an evil to be avoided. But in fact Death distinguishes between the self-control of the good driver, and diversions. In this respect, the distinction between *śreya* and *preya* is the distinction between the deontological (*śreya*), and the consequentialist (*preya*). The Platonic reading of Vedic thought inverts Death's lesson by identifying *śreya*, the deontological notion of self-governance, with the consequentialist idea of ideal utility, to be favoured over the merely pleasurable.

What then of the idea of Brahman as a super-soul, and the self as expression of this soul? Is this not Vedic? If it is the world-soul, would we not have Neo-Platonic reasons to shun pleasures and sense-experience as evil according to the Vedas?

On Death's account, each self has an interest in abstracting from its environment in the way that travellers have an interest in not colliding with objects along the way. To be a Self just is to have this interest. What we Selves have in common is our joint interest in Development–Brahman. This is the opposite of driving into the ditch. Development, just like the Self, is not a soul–and hence not a world-soul. Development is the *prescriptive* genus to which we all belong: it is what all Selves have in common. To follow the taxonomical analogy, each Self is as though a species: one's various moods (horses), expressions (charioteer) and behaviours (reins) instantiate this species that is oneself with various degrees of clarity. As items within a class inherit the defining traits, we can identify the Self (*ātmā*) with the prescription to develop ourselves (Brahman). This renders Brahman a collectivity of Selves that shares its traits. Brahman is more of the order of a categorical imperative of growth than a thing (much as the individual self is more the prescriptive centre to avoid driving into the ditch than what the self does). If Brahman is the class, and we are its members, the challenge of life is not to affirm it (that it is good) or deny life (that it is evil), but to live authentically. In

other words, the point of life on this account is not to avoid evil and aim for the good, but to live a life where we do not create evil that undermines our essential interests.

Of course, there are portions of the *Upaniṣad*s where Brahman is described as *sat, cit and ānanda* (truth/reality, awareness and joy– *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.1.3). But such characterisations are consistent with Brahman being the genus of development that every self is a part of and identical with. Understanding Brahman as a genus of growth that its members inherit as part of their essence gives rise to identity claims such as the *Upaniṣad*ic formula: *tat tvam asi* – "that you are" (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.8.7). If Brahman is the genus and *ātmā* is a member of this genus, then with respect to defining traits, *ātmā* contains Brahman as part of its essence. In this sense, you are Brahman. With respect to numerical identity, it is doubtful that we are the same Self. The ambiguity that this class inclusion raises with respect to questions of personal identity is the stuff of scholastic debates on how to interpret the *Upaniṣad*s: is there one self, or many (Madhva/Ānandatīrtha 1904; Rāmānuja 1996; Śaṅkara (Ādi) 1983). Monists tend to read "*ātmā*" and "*brahman*" as synonyms for the same species (individuality gets offloaded on to the *"jīva*" or living agent–the soul and body). Pluralists tend to read "*ātmā*" as the species and "*brahman*" as the genus–an approach that is closer to the literal idea of the *ātmā* and Brahman as Self and Development, and to the philosophy of Yoga set out by Death in the *Upaniṣad*s. Either way, we are not our soul. Our task is not to avoid the evils of pleasures. Evil is not a thing in the world that we must steer clear of. Our goal is to survive our life and thereby not create evil for ourselves and others. When we are good at this, it is as pleasurable as an exhilarating ride in a chariot.

One might argue that if we share the same interests, we are the same person. But if the basis of moral conscience is our identity, as Schopenhauer thought, I

could just as easily abuse you if I despised myself: evil would be a natural outcome of my attitude towards myself. Or, if I deny our noumenal identity, but concern myself instead with my own self-development, it seems that I can avoid my agent-relative obligations and my agent-neutral obligations (Bharadwaja 1984). It would seem that evil pops up again, as the thing we leave at the side of the road for others to contend with while we worry about our own personal destiny. These are Orientalist criticisms, as they render the moral dialectic of *Upaniṣad*ic thought immature. Something is wrong.

The problem with the first criticism is that it assumes that the *Upaniṣad* theory entails that my interest in being nice to myself has to do with some type of contingent self-love that could be just as easily replaced by malice. But rather, the argument is that my interest in being good to myself (not making evil for myself) defines who I am. So self-understanding is not continuous with self-loathing or self-malice. Second, the theory of the *Upaniṣad*s does not require that we are the same person (self) in order for us to act in each other's interests. We need only share interests so that in protecting one's own self-interest, one is protecting the interests of all.

Third, the theory entails that one's duty to oneself is a benefit to others. A world that is safe for me to move around in is a world that is safe for you to move around in. If I allow you to suffer evils such as death, I have to face your illness and dead body–your evils– as an impediment to my travels. If I allow a world of illness and violence, I run the risk of getting sick or hurt. If I am concerned for my own safety as a traveller, I (by contrast) look out for your interests as a traveller too. This is what it is for ourselves to be defined by Development (Brahman). Our self-interest is the eradication of evil.

The interest we share is not defined by our sex, gender, race, species, number of legs, sexual orientation or skin colour. What we share is an interest in

avoiding Death (dying actually) as a public event that can harm us. This is the same as our interest in rendering Death (the loss of autonomy) private via self-governance. If I pursue my interest in avoiding Death as a public event–my interest in self-governance–I protect your interest in avoiding Death as a public event.

Things look very different when we are worried about goods. Even when our lists of goods are the same (or especially when they are the same), and we live life in pursuit of them, we can (as it were) "bump into" each other. This is what Hobbes calls a "State of War" (*Leviathan,* Chapters XIII–XIV). Evil here is a natural outcome of the pursuit of goods that we desire. We would avoid this if we were interested in Death's recommendation: *śreya* instead of *preya*–control instead of utility. Being concerned for one's own Development would work just the same. This is to seek nothing but our autonomy.

Conclusion

Wendy Doniger in her *Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* writes:

> Vedic religion is largely healthy-minded, ignoring (rather than denying) the more tragic aspects of life, aspiring to heaven, and invoking benevolent gods. The *Upaniṣad*s introduce the insights of the sick soul and pave the way for a vision of the essentially evil nature of life, a vision which largely colors the image of the Hindu gods themselves in the early period: malevolence or inadequacy motivating the divinities who determine our fates (Doniger 1976: 375).

This resonates with Schweitzer's comments that in the *Upaniṣad*s, we find life-denial. But this story is plausible only if we ignore the philosophical shift in the Vedic corpus. What is really going on in the Vedas is a shift from naturalism to

non-naturalism; from consequentialism to deontology. Whereas naturalism sees the world as governed by many observable natural forces, which we ignore at our peril, non-naturalism treats prescriptive concepts of moral responsibility–self-governance, self-ownership, self-direction–as fundamental. Whereas Consequentialism concerns itself with good and evil, deontology moves past this, to questions of self-governance and autonomy. Beyond good and evil here is not beyond ethics: it is deontology. When we shift to the non-naturalism of the Vedas, we enter the philosophical world of yoga. Here we realise natural explanation is something we resort to at our peril. Ideally, each one of us is free and self-directing, which means it is not the forces of nature that we need to appease, but our own requirement for direction and responsibility. The gods of nature will always appear malevolent when we decide to orientate our life around self-determination. For when one centres one's life in oneself, all the elements seem to deny one's autonomy. The goal is to show them wrong. This is yoga.

The gods of nature are also less interesting when I understand them as bound up in a world-view where evil plays an essential role. According to the early Vedic reckoning, I am motivated to appease the gods of nature in proportion to my desire to avoid evil. But evil is thereby a force that plays a role in my life. I cannot get rid of it, at most I can avoid it. If I want evil to be gone, I require another explanation for how things go wrong. If I choose myself as the explanation of how things go wrong, then I need only set a path to righteousness to get rid of evil. This path is the paradoxical loss of autonomy: self-control. This is life after Death.

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