

Accelerated Learning Series

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Modules in Spiritual Philosophies

Spiritual Philosophies Categorized

A look at the common philosophical categories.

Dedicated To

Ramakrishna Menon

For his insights into the workings of nature.

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Prerequisites

- An interest in Spirituality.

Preface

Looking back at life, I know that I have benefited immensely from my exposure to the many philosophies that attempt to explain our source, our purpose and our goals even when these philosophies do not accommodate the one that I subscribe to. In the cases when these philosophies share enough common ground with the one that I subscribe to, I can often reconcile the purpose for any differences that may exist. In the cases when these philosophies hardly share anything in common with the one that I subscribe to, I see their limitations in explaining the things that matter the most to me. In both of these cases however, they help reinforce my perceptions.

The greatest benefit of reaching *individual* conclusions is in its unwavering conviction. Such a conviction helps propel an individual along the chosen path without having to endure constant distractions along the way. Such a conviction does not necessarily preclude a change of viewpoint along the journey either, but if and when such a change occurs it will be backed by substantive reason and experience.

In this set of notes on philosophical categories I attempt to share my perceptions on four broad categories that capture the bulk of the philosophies that I have benefited from over the years. Conspicuously absent is a category on polytheistic philosophies. This is because, to the best of my understanding, on matters related life, its source, its purpose and its ultimate goal, polytheistic philosophies can be accommodated within the framework of the four categories that I outline here.

In conclusion it is worth mentioning that some have asked why my study of spirituality invariably dwells on the eastern philosophies, especially when I was exposed to the Judeo-Christian scriptures throughout my formative years in high school. The answer to this question lies in the level of detail revealed in eastern philosophies. It is my understanding that the essence of the Christian faith is easily reconcilable with eastern philosophies. However, eastern philosophies offer a more comprehensive approach.

To illustrate this point let us briefly examine the fundamental questions surrounding the destination of the soul under each of these two philosophies.

In the Christian faith death offers two options for the soul – a place in heaven or a place in hell. Heaven is a desirable place while hell is not. On judgment day, our deeds in this life will dictate which of these two destinations we deserve.

The bulk of the eastern philosophies (Buddhism being a notable exception) are based on the Vedic philosophy (a set of scriptures known as the Vedas). The Vedic philosophy also refers to more desirable and less desirable destinations for the soul based on the deeds in this life. But it offers substantial elaboration on this process. It refers to the material world as made up of three modes of nature – goodness, passion and ignorance. The higher planets in the material worlds are predominantly in the mode of goodness, the middle planets (our planet falls in this category) are predominantly in the mode of passion and the lower planets are predominantly in the mode of ignorance. Each individual has some level of freedom in choosing the actions in each of these modes of nature. These choices are the guiding factor on judgment day. One who wishes to escape the grip of material nature altogether must transcend all three modes of nature. This is achieved by the dedication of all actions in the service of the Lord.

Acknowledgements

I dedicate this set of notes to the famous astrologer Mr. Ramakrishna Menon from Calicut, Kerala, India, who played an instrumental role in my formative years. Over a course of thirteen years, he shared insights about the workings of nature that helped convince me of certain truths.

I often made a point of making unannounced visits to Mr. Menon's office when I was in town. He was always courteous and hospitable. We discussed astrology and its revelations about nature. I always played devil's advocate and our debates sometimes got heated.

It was customary for Mr. Menon to rise from his chair and hold my right hand with both his hands as I left his office after each meeting. On my last visit in November of 1994, he held my hand and walked me all the way to the door and there he looked intently with a sense of fatherly affection and told me that it would most likely be out last meeting in this life. A prophetic claim as it turned out.

It took a few more years before I fully appreciated the significance of our relationship and the merits of Mr. Menon's insights.

Looking back at the many exchanges I had with Mr. Menon, I remain most indebted for his intellect, his breadth of knowledge, and most of all for his patience and compassion toward a rambunctious teenager.

1.0 – The Philosophy of Matter

When one refers to matter, they are referring to the corporeal substance or substances of which any physical object is composed of. When we talk about the philosophy of matter, we are referring to **a philosophy that denies the possibility of an incorporeal substance, such as the soul or spirit, from being part of a physical object.**

In recent centuries this philosophy has become synonymous with what is colloquially, and inaccurately, referred to as the scientific philosophy. Perhaps the root cause for this misunderstanding lies in a limited interpretation of one of the tenets of the scientific method, namely empirical verification (for description of the scientific method, refer to the ALS notes on Science and Spirituality). While empirical verification does not deny the validity of the observations from within oneself, it requires the reproduction of these observations in others under *similar* conditions. In matters of the mind however, it is certainly questionable if one can recreate *similar conditions* for others and hence this avenue of observation is often disregarded. What that leaves science with is merely the analysis of corporeal substances and hence the philosophy of matter becomes synonymous with the scientific philosophy.

The philosophy of matter attempts to explain our existence and our environment on the sole basis of corporeal substances and physical laws defining the interaction of these corporeal substances. Among the most popular of these theories are the **Big Bang** and the **Darwin's theory of evolution**. The Big Bang is a theory that attempts to explain the current state of the cosmos and its origins. Darwin's theory of evolution attempts to explain the origins of the variety of species in nature.

The Big Bang

Let us briefly look at the ideas represented by the Big Bang. We must preface this discussion by stating that even the most fervent advocates of this theory will readily admit that it is purely conjectural.

To serve as an introduction, let us first briefly recap some of the physical laws of surrounding optics.

Visible white light consists of signals of different frequencies. If one were to separate white light into its individual frequency components, we would have a spectrum of colors much like a rainbow. On one end of the spectrum will be the color Red and on the other end will be a Blue (or Violet). Red corresponds to the lower frequencies in white light and Blue corresponds to the higher frequencies. As light travels long distances the frequency of the light waves decrease. In other words, the waves shift toward the red end of the spectrum. This is referred to as the **Red-Shift**.

In **1927 Georges Lemaitre**, a Belgian Priest, observed that there was red shift in the light originating for distant galaxies, thus leading him to propose that these galaxies were moving farther away from us. **Edwin Hubble** later experimentally verified that galaxies were moving in every direction away from us at speeds proportional to their distance from us. It is the theoretical study of the origins of this continual growth of the universe that leads to the Big Bang.

The Big Bang speculates that at the instant of the birth of our universe, which we will refer to from now on as "time zero", all of matter, antimatter and space were located at one point. What existed before time zero is an unknown in terms of the Big Bang theory. Time zero is defined as 15 to 20 billion years ago. At time zero, there was a tremendous explosion – the Big Bang!

This explosion caused particles of **matter** (neutrons, protons and electrons) and **antimatter** (antineutron, antiproton and positrons) to disperse in all directions and collisions between matter and antimatter led to annihilation and the dissipation of a lot of energy in the form of heat. As it turned out, even though there was equal amount of matter and antimatter, by some fluke of asymmetry, residual matter prevailed through this time of mutual annihilation, while antimatter perished.

About one to three minutes into this explosion the expansion of the universe led to some cooling. This cooler temperature allowed protons and neutrons to react and form certain types of hydrogen.

As the universe expanded further, more cooling occurred and more complex elements of nature started to form eventually leading to the many galaxies, including our own Milky Way, that continue to fly away from the scene of the explosion.

Much of this theory is based on the extrapolation of many bits of observations. At the present moment, this theory allows us to tie most of our observations together.

Darwin's Theory of Evolution

Now that we have some understanding on what the philosophy of matter offers in terms of the origins of the Universe, let us see what it offers in terms of the origins of life.

For as long as history has recorded human opinion, there was a view that humans could have **evolved** from less intelligent forms of life. But it was not until the British naturalist **Charles Darwin**, proposed a rationale and method to this process in **1859**, that science adopted it as its most likely theory.

Darwin's theory is based on five observations;

- 1) Species of life generally have more offspring than can grow to adulthood.
- 2) Populations are roughly the same size most of the time.
- 3) Food resources are limited and often constant.
- 4) In sexually reproducing species, generally no two individuals are identical.
- 5) This variation in species is inheritable.


Based on these observations, Darwin proposes that each individual must struggle to survive in an environment that is set under these conditions. This struggle lends itself to those with the "best" characteristics to survive and pass their traits to future generations of their species. This process is referred to as **natural selection**.

As may be imagined, this theory has been very controversial since the very beginning since most people believe that it stands in the way of the scriptural teachings that life is created. It is debatable if indeed this theory can or cannot co-exist with the scriptural view of creation. Darwin himself did not claim either way. Darwin was explicitly asked if his theory would negate the creation theory in the Bible by the widow of the English mathematician George Boole, **Mary Everest** (she was the niece of Sir George Everest – after whom the mountain is named). Darwin's answer was evasive. Darwin described himself as an agnostic.

The process of natural selection does not necessarily state that life comes from matter, though that link is made by some. What it does state is the higher forms of life come from lower forms of life.

Conclusion

The Big Bang and Darwin's theory of evolution are the best answers that the philosophy of matter has to offer those in search of our origins, our purpose and our future. If one were to subscribe to this theory, the creation of our universe and the creation of life are both random accidents without any known cause or purpose and consequently death also bears no meaning.



2.0 – The Philosophy of Rules and Regulations

Unlike the philosophy of matter which looks to the “outside” for revelations, the philosophy of rules and regulations looks at the “inside”.

The most popular practice of this philosophy is found in **Buddhism**. It is a system that was started by **Siddhartha Gautama** in Nepal **several thousand years ago**. As the story goes, Siddhartha was born into affluent circumstances but took to the ascetic path in search of answers, after realizing that life was constantly riddled with the misery of old age, disease and ultimately death.

Siddhartha sat beneath a Pipal tree in meditation and vowed to stay there until he gained enlightenment. After forty days, it is said that Siddhartha attained ultimate knowledge and consequently freedom from life’s miseries. He spent the next forty-five years of his life traveling and sharing **Buddha-Dharma** or the teachings of the enlightened one.

Buddha never claimed to be God, though Vedic scriptures refer to him as an incarnation of God. What he taught was a means to enlightenment through certain practices and life styles. These practices have no recognition of God per se, but they follow certain rules and regulations that allow an individual to blossom into a state of enlightenment.

The Four Truths

The rules of Buddhism are based on the recognition of four truths;

1. Life is full of misery.
2. Desire is the root cause of misery.
3. Misery ends as soon as Desire is controlled.
4. Certain rules and regulations help control desire and consequently end misery.

The Five Precepts

The rules that help take one to the path of enlightenment are;

1. Not killing or causing harm to all forms of life, instead love is shared (Buddhists are usually vegetarians).
2. Not taking that which is not given, instead generosity is encouraged.
3. Avoiding sexual misconduct, instead abstinence and contentment is encouraged.
4. Avoiding false speech, instead truthfulness is encouraged.
5. Avoiding intoxication, instead mindfulness and awareness is encouraged.

Meditation, action in awareness and **association with like minded people** are encouraged as the means to abide by these precepts in life.

Conclusion

This philosophy does not dwell on what the state of enlightenment is, except to say that it defeats the misery of life. It also does not require devotion to God to attain this state of enlightenment. Action in accordance with the rules and regulations can get an individual to the state of enlightenment. It is certainly debatable how one can sustain this state of enlightenment, but for

one who is more concerned about reaching this state of enlightenment rather than sustaining that state, it is a level of detail that is irrelevant for the time being.

3.0 – The Philosophy of an Impersonal God

It is not uncommon to come across opinions that describe God as some formless, featureless, all pervading energy that is not manifested. Unlike the previous two categories of philosophies where there was no recognition of God, this category is a theistic philosophy.

Scripturally speaking, there is substantial justification for such an all pervading energy that is not manifested. This is particularly true in eastern philosophies. In the Bhagavad-Gita, a scripture that is considered the essence of Vedic philosophy, Lord Krishna reveals that one who engages in full devotional service, unflinching in all circumstances, at once transcends the modes of material nature and thus comes to the level Brahman (impersonal all pervading energy) and that the Lord is the basis of the impersonal Brahman, which is immortal, imperishable and eternal and is the constitutional position of ultimate happiness (BG 14:26-27). Lord Krishna also says that Brahman, the spirit, is subordinate to Him (BG 13:13).

Also in the Bhagavad-Gita, Arjuna, a friend and devotee of the Lord, asks Krishna which of the two forms (personal or impersonal) would be considered more perfect as an object of meditation and worship. The Lord responds by saying that those who fix their minds on His personal form and are always engaged in worshipping Him with great and transcendental faith are considered by Him to be most perfect. The Lord goes on to say that to make progress in the worship of the impersonal Brahman is always difficult and troublesome for the embodied soul (BG 12:1-5).

It must be noted that the Lord does not dispute the existence of His impersonal aspect. However, the emphasis on this aspect is subordinate to the personal aspect.

Among the followers of the Vedic teachings, there is a sect referred to as **jnana-yogis** who believe that the impersonal aspect of the Lord is actually superior to the personal aspect of the Lord. This belief however, is not shared by the Bhagavad-Gita wherein Lord Krishna categorically claims that unintelligent men, who do not know Him perfectly, think that He was impersonal before and have now assumed this personality (BG 7:24). For reasons such as this, some jnana-yogis claim that Bhagavad-Gita is not an authoritative component of Vedic scriptures.

One of the main problems with the practice of the impersonal philosophy is that it inevitably dwells in the esoteric (from the standpoint of an embodied soul) and hence is forced to make farfetched assumptions, interpretations and speculations to suite these esoteric conceptions. For example, throughout the Bhagavad-Gita Lord Krishna refers to Himself as “I” or “Me” as the personal God. Jnana-yogis will claim that the term “I” and “Me” is not referring to Krishna the person, but to the featureless all pervading energy which cannot be conceived. This interpretation can be very frustrating when analyzing versus where Lord Krishna says “Always think of Me”. How does one think of something that cannot be conceived?

There are some parallels between the beliefs of the Jnana-yogis and **Gnosticism** in the first ages of Christianity. Coincidentally both “Jnana” and “Gnosticism” are derived from root words meaning “knowledge”. Both sects believe that highest truths are revealed only to those who are to become perfect with knowledge of esoteric mysteries.

Jnana-yogis and Liberation

Jnana-yogis believe that liberation involves merging into this all pervading energy of the Lord and thus becoming one with the Lord.

This belief stems from a theory of “universal oneness”, where individuality is considered a state of illusion. Note that this concept of universal oneness is not directly tied to the impersonal conception of God. In other words, not all who conceive of God as impersonal think that they are

one with God. This is an additional concept in the philosophy of jnana-yogis where the belief is that the living being is in actuality one with the impersonal God but due to illusory forces considers itself separate from the impersonal God.

There are many unanswered questions in this philosophy. For example, jnana-yogis acknowledge that one is bound to the reactions of his or her actions. This implies that the reactions to my actions cannot be assigned to another individual. And yet if individuality is a product of illusion, then how is it possible to assign reactions to an individual?

Conclusion

While the impersonal philosophy distinguishes itself from the previous atheistic philosophies, it leaves us with many unanswered questions much like the previous philosophies. This philosophy dwells in the esoteric and hence often leaves the sincere seeker frustrated with postulations that cannot be perceived. To accommodate these postulations, proponents of this philosophy are forced to provide interpretations of scripture that cannot be reconciled with their most literal meanings. Furthermore, the practice of this philosophy involves meditation on that which cannot be perceived making it most impractical.

Yet another risk with this philosophy is that the associated frustration can cause one to revert back to the atheistic philosophies.

Lord Krishna discourages this path for the embodied soul.

4.0 – The Philosophy of a Personal God

This category captures the bulk of the religious philosophies known to man. The philosophies of Islam, Christianity, Judaism and the Vedas all subscribe to a monotheistic God to whom all of creation is attributed. God is referred to with many different names like **Allah**, **Jesus**, **Yahweh** and **Krishna**.

All these philosophies stress on moral duties, obligations and love for a forgiving God to whom we are eternally related.

All these philosophies recognize our existence in the material world as a temporary and undesirable state where we don't enjoy direct contact with this loving God.

All these philosophies prescribe loving devotional service to God and all His creations as the remedy for our current predicament.

All these philosophies recommend the avoidance of excessive material attachments, because they recognize their entrapping effect.

All these philosophies recognize death as the final exam that tests our qualification to promote ourselves to a better place.

Indeed the commonality in all of these different faiths associated with a personal God, are numerous. There are differences however, in what is classified as sinful and detrimental to spiritual progress. There are also differences in the processes and rituals that are observed in worship. There are disagreements on who is God and who is a messiah. But the commonality far outweighs all the differences.

Devotional Service

The most striking common feature of all philosophies that subscribe to a personal God, lies in the merits of devotional service. Every one of these philosophies promotes devotion and love for God as the primary ingredient for spiritual progress. It is through this love for God that one recognizes and fulfills the duties and obligations and consequently promotes oneself at death. Love and devotion to God is not just a means to liberation from material bondage but the sustaining force that keeps us in the spiritual world.

Conclusion

From an eastern philosophical perspective, one who takes to the devotional service to God, comes to the following three stages of spiritual conclusions;

- 1) The very first stage of spiritual awakening starts with the knowledge that the soul is eternal.
- 2) The next stage of spiritual realization revolves around the power and laws of nature – For every action there is a reaction that must be faced in the material world.
- 3) The highest level of spiritual realization involves the surrender of all actions as a loving service to The Supreme Personality of Godhead. One who enjoys this platform of self-realization is no longer under the grip of material nature.