

Note: This is an uncorrected version of my paper on Eastern Religions published in *Reason for the Hope Within*, Michael Murray, editor, Eerdmans, January 1999. This book is an excellent anthology of essays on Christian Apologetics written by a group of young philosophers. Among other things, it contains excellent essays on the Problem of Evil, The Incarnation and the Trinity, and Faith and Reason. If you like the following essay on the fine-tuning, I strongly urge you to consider buying the book.

J. P. Moreland of the Talbot School of Theology had this to say about the book: "During the last two decades there has been a renaissance of excellent activity in Christian philosophy. With notable exceptions, the fruits of this work have not permeated the seminaries or the lay community. . . . That is why the release of Reason for the Hope Within is more than just the publication of a new book. It symbolizes a hope for a new day. The book provides believers and unbelievers alike with a refreshing, stimulating, and powerful treatment of crucial issues relevant to spiritual and intellectual flourishing and the credibility of Christianity. This is a book that simply must be studied by pastors, lay leaders, and, indeed, all those who wish to be strengthened in their Christian faith or challenged to embrace it."

Similarly, William Alston, Professor of Philosophy at Syracuse University, wrote concerning the book: "A brilliantly executed distillation of recent philosophical explorations of basic themes in the Christian faith, put into a form that is accessible to general readers. This work can make an enormous difference in the thinking of Christian believers, and of those interested in Christianity, about the contents and status of Christian belief."

EASTERN RELIGIONS

Robin Collins

I. INTRODUCTION

Many people believe that the existence of other world religions somehow undermines the tenability of Christianity. In this chapter, I will only consider this apologetic challenge in light of the major Eastern religions of Hinduism and Buddhism. Moreover, I will only consider one type of challenge, namely the claim that Eastern religions offer a truly viable alternative worldview to that of Western theism. According to this challenge, we have no reason to prefer a Western theistic worldview over the Eastern alternatives. (For the purposes of this chapter, by a religion's *worldview* I simply mean the claims it makes about the ultimate nature and structure of reality, that is, what philosophers call its *metaphysics*.)

My basic approach to answering this apologetic challenge will be first to explicate the core worldview underlying each of the various major schools of Hinduism and Buddhism, and then evaluate their cogency and purported support. We will focus exclusively on the major traditional systems of Eastern religious thought as articulated by what advocates of these systems consider their leading philosophers.⁽¹⁾ Because of space constraints and the apologetic purpose of this chapter, I will only focus on the core aspects of their worldview; moreover, I will mainly focus on the various weaknesses of the Eastern systems of thought that we will be considering, though I will attempt to be as fair as possible in the process. A full scale evaluation, however, would also have to look at their strengths, and then compare their strengths and weaknesses with

the strengths and weaknesses of Western theism. Clearly this would require a book-length treatment. This chapter, therefore, should be seen as only providing a first step towards assessing and responding to the apologetic challenge these religions present.

I realize that, for a variety of good and bad reasons, the sort of enterprise I am engaging in is currently out of fashion. Instead, out of a supposed respect for other religions, we are often encouraged merely to describe but not evaluate them. I believe, however, that we demonstrate the highest respect for other religions by carefully evaluating them, for in doing this we show that we take their claims about reality seriously enough to merit careful investigation.

Before I begin, however, I should address several other objections to this sort of enterprise:

Objection 1: Any evaluation you offer will beg the question against the philosophies of the East since of necessity your evaluation will use Western forms of reasoning and logic; but, the East has its own way of thinking that is different from the West. *Response:* The idea that the East has a different way of thinking than the West is largely a myth that seriously underestimates the rigor and logic of their philosophical thinking. As philosopher Stephan Phillips shows (1995), many Eastern schools of thought developed sophisticated systems of logic and argumentation to defend their views against opposing schools. Indeed, many of these schools held views, or deployed arguments, quite similar to those found in the West. For example, the theistic schools in ancient India offered arguments for the existence of God based on the apparent design of the universe and its moral order, what in the West are known as the teleological argument and the moral argument for God's existence, respectively.

Objection 2: You focus too much on the overall worldview of these Eastern thinkers, which is a Western concern. Eastern thinkers, on the other hand, are more concerned with practice. So, your whole project ends up doing an injustice to them. *Response:* Although it is true that Eastern thinkers tend to be more concerned with practice, our focus on overall worldview is appropriate since the practices of these other religions only present an apologetic challenge to Western theism insofar as they presuppose an alternative worldview.

II. ASSUMPTIONS SHARED BY HINDUS AND BUDDHISTS

Traditional Hindus and Buddhists, along with most philosophy in India, share a common set of assumptions about the nature of the cosmos and our place within it. Of particular importance are the following:

i) Absorption of polytheism: Unlike the major Western religions, Hinduism, and to a lesser extent Buddhism, absorbed and then reinterpreted ancient polytheistic religious practice. For example, rather than opposing and eventually stamping out the worship and devotion to many gods as happened in ancient Judaism, the Hindu religion reinterpreted the gods as being special manifestations or representations of Brahman instead of independent entities. This means that what looks to us like the worship of many gods in Hinduism is really, from the Hindu perspective, the worship of one God through multiple manifestations.

ii) The Doctrines of Rebirth and Karma: Except for certain Westernized versions of Buddhism (and some Zen Buddhists), Hindus and Buddhists both accept the doctrines of *rebirth* (or reincarnation) and *karma*. According to the doctrine of rebirth, each of us existed in a previous life and will likely be reborn after death. And, according to the doctrine of karma, the circumstances of an individual in any given life are largely a result of the moral worth of their deeds and character in previous lives. Along with these ideas of rebirth and karma, traditional schools of Hinduism hold that our existence is without beginning, and hence that each of us has already undergone this process rebirth, with its associated karma, an infinite number of times from eternity past. (Buddhists either follow Hindus here in claiming that our existence is without beginning, or following some sayings of the Buddha, remain agnostic on the issue.)

The two doctrines of rebirth and karma form the fundamental belief structure from which all Indian philosophies spring. As Edward Stevens writes with regard to Hinduism,

All orthodox Hindus accept the doctrine of rebirth from life to life. The idea that one human life span is generally sufficient for self-liberation is preposterous to the ordinary Hindu. And since there is rebirth, there is a soul that gets reborn. In the West, we can find it worthwhile to discuss whether there is a soul and whether it is immortal. The immortality of the soul is a problem for us. For the Hindu, the existence of the self and its continual rebirth until ultimate liberation is a fact of life. It's something "everybody knows." There's nothing to discuss. (pp. 72-73).

iii) The Eternality of the Universe: Unlike Western theistic religions, traditional Hindus and many Buddhists believe that the universe has always existed, and has eternally been going through cycles of growth, stasis, and dissolution. Various accounts are then given of how selves survive the periods of cosmic dissolution. Furthermore, many Hindus and Buddhists, believe in other universes and realities. Among other things, these other realities provide a way for Hindus and Buddhists to reconcile the increasing world population with their doctrine of rebirth: the extra selves needed to account for this increase can be postulated to come from these other universes or realities.

iv) Salvation as Liberation from Rebirth: Generally speaking, both Buddhists and Hindus see salvation (or enlightenment) as liberation from the cycle of rebirths and its associated karma. (Exceptions to this are certain westernized forms of Buddhism, and some adherents to Zen, which see salvation more in terms of achieving a state of enlightenment in this life.)

III. HINDUISM

Introduction

Hinduism is a religious system dating back to at least 1200 B. C. The earliest Hindu scriptures were the *Vedas*, which were essentially writings concerned with the proper way of performing rituals and sacrifices to the gods. Eventually speculation arose about what lies behind the gods themselves. This led to the development of the idea of *Rita*, the eternal and immutable law of justice and order, and *Brahman*, the ultimate metaphysical reality that underlies the world, including the gods. The idea of *Rita* eventually spawned the idea of *karma*, with its associated idea of rebirth, and *moksha*, the idea that we can be liberated from the cycle of rebirths.

The nature of Brahman and its relation to the world, especially the human self, eventually became more fully articulated in the other major class of core Hindu scriptures, the *Upanishads*. These were written between about 400 B.C. and 200 B.C. and considered the culmination, or end of the *Vedas*. These are essentially the writings of "saints" and "seers" who were believed to have special insight into the nature of ultimate reality. Along with the *Upanishads* and *Vedas*, a variety of other sacred literature was developed. Unlike the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, however, this literature has in general not been officially sanctioned as absolutely authoritative by orthodox Hindus, but rather is afforded a semi-scriptural status (in much the same way the Old Testament Apocrypha is viewed by Catholics and some Protestants). The most famous and widely studied of these additional writings is the *Bhagavad-Gita*, or Song of God, a work probably cited and studied more than the *Upanishads* or *Vedas* themselves.

Although there have been a variety of philosophical and religious systems of thought in India, according to most Indian thinkers the only truly live options within orthodox Hinduism today are elaborations and variations of three major Hindu theologies systematically formulated by *Sankara* (pronounced: shum-cah-rah) in the 8th century A.D., by *Ramanuja* (pronounced: Rah mah noo jah) in the 11th century A.D., and that formulated by *Madhva* (pronounced: Mudh vah) in the 12th century A.D. All three of these individuals

attempted to develop a systematic Hindu theology based on the Vedas, the Upanishads, the short summary and systematization of the *Upanishads* called the Brahma-sutra or Vedanta-sutra, along with other texts, especially the Bhagavad-Gita in the case of Ramanuja and Madhva.

As Ninian Smart points out, " Sankara's metaphysics is *par excellence* the theology of modern Hinduism as presented to the West; and it is the most vigorous and dominant doctrine among Hindu intellectuals." (1964, p. 97). Unfortunately, because of this, popular Western presentations of Hinduism often present the Hindu view of reality as identical with Sankara's theology. This in turn gives the impression that Hindus all share the same view of reality, one which is radically at odds with Western theism. As Swami Nikhilananda (1967, p. 222) and others have noted, however, the majority of the Hindu population are followers of Ramanuja and Madhva, not Sankara, at least if we judge them by their practice. Unlike many popular presentations of Hinduism, therefore, this chapter will take seriously this diversity of Hindu views by looking at all three traditional schools of Hinduism. We will begin with Sankara.

Sankara School

Brief Explication of Core View

The Sankara school is often called *Avaita* (non-dualistic) *Vedanta* or simply *Vedanta*. As traditionally interpreted, the Sankara school claims that there is ultimately only one reality, *Brahman*, with which each of us is absolutely identical. Moreover, they claim that Brahman is pure consciousness, without any internal differentiation or characteristics whatsoever. (An analogy to their view of Brahman might be seen by considering what your own consciousness would be like if you were able to completely blank your mind of all internal differentiation and distinctions--that is, if through meditation you eliminated all sense impressions, feelings, and thoughts and simply experienced a state of pure awareness.)

Since Brahman comprises all of reality, and since there are no internal distinctions within Brahman, it follows that ultimately the world of separate entities, distinctions, and characteristics is an illusion. Followers of Sankara claim that this illusion, which they call *maya*, is produced by *ignorance*--that is, by our misapprehension of the true nature of Brahman. Salvation therefore consists of experientially realizing, through intense meditation, the Truth about ourselves--namely, that each of us is already identical with Brahman. Once we realize this, ignorance will vanish and we will hence escape from the cycle of rebirths.

Although Hinduism is often considered to be pantheistic--that is, to be claiming that everything is God or an aspect of God--this understanding is false for the Sankara school, as it is for the other major schools of Hinduism. Advocates of the Sankara school, for example, do not claim that everything in this world--such as the rock on which you stub your toe--is God. Rather, they claim that everything in this world is an illusion, including the rock. Thus this view is perhaps better called *cosmic illusionism* instead of pantheism.

Of course, there are many more facets to Sankara's thought than has been presented above. But the above claims lie at the very heart of his worldview, and they are the points at which his worldview runs into severe problems. We will look at these problems in the next section, along with the major responses followers of Sankara have offered to them.

Evaluation

In this section we will: 1) critique the core worldview of Sankara's philosophy; then 2) examine how followers of Sankara might could respond to the various critiques; and finally 3), attempt to draw an overall conclusion from our examination.

1. Critique of Sankara's view

a. The View is Self-Contradictory: The first problem with the core of Sankara's philosophy is that it seems to be *self-contradictory*. As advocates of the other Hindu schools of thought have pointed out, if the only reality is Brahman, and Brahman is pure, *distinctionless* consciousness, then there cannot exist any real distinctions in reality. But the claim that this world is an illusion already presupposes that there is an actual distinction between illusion and reality, just as the claim that something is a dream already presupposes the distinction between waking consciousness and dream consciousness. Moreover, Sankara's idea of salvation--that is, enlightenment through recognition that all is Brahman--already presupposes a distinction between living in a state of unenlightenment (ignorance) and living in a state of enlightenment. So this view contradicts itself by, on the one hand, saying that reality (Brahman) is distinctionless, while on the other hand distinguishing between *maya* and the truth of Brahman, and by distinguishing between being enlightened and unenlightened.

b. The Impossibility of Maya: A second and related problem is that ignorance, which Sankara and his followers claim is the source of *maya*, could not exist. According to the Sankara school, Brahman is perfect, pure, and complete Knowledge, the opposite of ignorance. Hence, ignorance cannot exist in Brahman. But, since nothing exists apart from Brahman, ignorance cannot exist apart from Brahman either. Thus, it follows that ignorance could not exist, contrary to their assertion that our perception of a world of distinct things is a result of ignorance.

c. The Lack of Evidence: A final problem is that it seems that one could never have any satisfactory experiential basis for believing in Sankara's philosophy. Certainly, everyday experience and observation are completely in conflict with his claim, since they overwhelmingly testify to the existence of a real world of distinct things and properties. Indeed, even if we assume that the entire material world does not exist, but is merely a dream, experience would still overwhelmingly testify against Sankara's claim: for, within our dream itself there are innumerable distinct experiences, from the experience of feeling sad to that of seeing what looks like a rainbow. Thus Sankara's philosophy cannot even explain the world we experience as being an illusion or dream. As a result, it ends up providing close to the worse possible explanation of our experiences.

This last problem should put to rest the common assertion that aspects of modern physics, particularly quantum mechanics, supports this, or similar systems of Eastern thought such as Zen Buddhism (see below). The scientific method consists of performing various observations of the world, and then trying to construct hypotheses that explain these observations. We then choose the hypothesis that makes the best sense of these observations, and reject those hypotheses that significantly conflict with observation. Because Sankara's philosophy is in conflict with almost all of our observations, science by its very methodology could never give us good reason to believe it, but rather every reason to reject it.

2. Responses to First Two Critiques

Advocates of the Sankara school respond to accusations of logical incoherence raised above in several ways, all of which I believe are ultimately unsatisfactory. First, some Indian thinkers have defended Sankara by pointing out that he never claimed that *maya* exists: rather, Sankara claimed that ultimately *maya* has some form of reality between existence and non-existence.⁽²⁾ It is difficult to see, however, how this response helps. The claim that Brahman is pure, distinctionless knowledge implies that *maya* has no reality whatsoever, not even the quasi-existential status of neither existing nor non-existing. The contradiction thus remains.

The second and more powerful response that advocates of the Sankara school have given is that human logic and reason operate from the standpoint of *ignorance* or *maya*, and thus are invalid.⁽³⁾ Moreover, once the true perspective is obtained (in which we recognize that everything is Brahman), ignorance vanishes and consequently the self-contradiction resulting from the so-called existence of ignorance no longer poses a problem. With regard to our first two critiques of Sankara, those who offer this response could claim that the law of non-contradiction, the fundamental rule of logic according to which a statement cannot be both true and false at the same time, is ultimately invalid because it is based in *ignorance*. Thus, they could argue, we cannot legitimately reject their view because it is self-contradictory.

This second response, however, faces two major problems. First, it is what philosophers call "epistemically self-defeating." If human reason is invalid when it comes to the ultimate nature of reality, then Sankara himself could never offer us a valid reason--whether based on experience, testimony, or anything else--for believing in his philosophy. So why believe it? Moreover, this second response underestimates the seriousness of the charge that Sankara's view is self-contradictory. Certain Eastern philosophers, such as Garma C. C. Chang (pp. 133-4), are correct in pointing out that Western philosophers have not proven that reality itself must always obey the law of non-contradiction; rather, Western philosophy assumes its truth. Even so, the law of non-contradiction nonetheless typically functions as a condition for the meaningfulness of statements within language. If, for instance, someone insists that their friend, John Doe, is a bachelor and then they turn around and assert that this very same person, John Doe, is married to a woman called Jane Doe, we would become very puzzled and begin to lose our grip on what they were trying to say. At best, we would begin to wonder whether they were using the English words "bachelor" and "married" in the normal English sense. If they agreed that they were, then we would have to admit a failure to understand what they were trying to say. The reason for this is that their statement that John is married to Jane would simply negate their statement that John is a bachelor, given the normal English meanings of the words "married" and "bachelor". Hence, we would be left with no meaningful conception of John's marital status.

A similar point can be made regarding Sankara's philosophy. When he says that he is offering a path to enlightenment, and that our problem is that we are in a state of ignorance, we understand him to be saying that we are in a certain state of ignorance now, and that through diligently following the Hindu meditative practices, we can arrive at a state of enlightenment and bliss at some point in the future. But, when Sankara goes on to say that each of us is already identical with Brahman, and that Brahman is pure, distinctionless consciousness without a trace of ignorance, he completely negates any understanding we had of his first claim, namely that each of us is in a state of ignorance. For, if we take his claim about our identity with Brahman seriously, we must conclude that each of us is actually presently in a state of pure Knowledge, not ignorance. Accordingly, the problem for Sankara, as he is standardly understood, is not merely that what he says must be false because it is self-contradictory, but rather that the self-contradictory character of his claims precludes our forming any definite conception of what he is saying in the first place. At best, we could understand him as using language not to so much to describe his view of the nature of reality, but to point to a "reality" beyond language--much as poetry and art does, according to some. If all Sankara is doing is using language to point to the inexpressible, however, then what he says is not necessarily in conflict with most worldviews, even a Christian worldview--after all, the existence of a reality that is ultimately not completely expressible by language is certainly compatible with orthodox Christianity.

The final response we will consider to the objection that Sankara is inconsistent is that offered by philosopher Keith Ward. Essentially, Ward argues that Sankara has been misinterpreted. First, Ward claims that what Sankara means by reality is "that which is self-subsistent; which does not change or cease to be; which is not corruptible or dependent on other things." (p. 146). Thus, Ward tells us, when Sankara says that Brahman is the only existing reality, and that Brahman is distinctionless, this does not mean that the world does not exist. All it means is that the existence of the world is not self-subsistent and independent; rather, things in the world exist "only as appearances--that is, in relation to minds to which they appear. Taken out of relation to minds, they would cease to exist at all." (Ward, p. 146)

The problem with Ward's interpretation is that if one takes these "appearances" (and human subjective experiences in general) as really existing in relation to some mind or minds, then either: i) the mind which is having these appearances and experiences must be *Brahman*; or ii) there must be minds other than

Brahman that are having the appearances and experiences. If alternative (i) is adopted, then it follows that there are internal distinctions within Brahman's consciousness corresponding to the multitude of differing experiences we have every day, such as being sad, fearful, happy, or seeing a snow capped mountain. Worse, however, if (i) is adopted, then Brahman would have the experience of being ignorant, of performing evil acts, of experience suffering, and the like. But, these are all contrary to what Sankara (and the other schools of *Vedanta*) claim about *Brahman*: namely, that Brahman is perfect, pure, and without ignorance. If Ward adopts (ii), on the other hand, then our selves or minds become distinct from God's consciousness, and hence Sankara's claim that we are in reality identical with Brahman is lost. Finally, if either of these alternatives is advocated, then Sankara's philosophy loses its distinctiveness and simply becomes a form of qualified non-dualism or dualism, that is, a version of Ramanuja's or Madhva's metaphysics. If this is right, then we will be forced adopt the implausible position that most Indian intellectuals were mistaken in thinking they were different from each other.⁽⁴⁾

3. Response to the Final Critique of Sankara

Above we argued that there is no sufficient reason to believe Sankara's philosophy because it is in conflict with almost all of our experiences. The most immediate way advocates of the Sankara school could respond to this charge is by offering positive reasons for believing his claims. Three major sorts of reasons have been offered by Sankara and his followers for their belief system. First, Sankara himself primarily supported his belief system by appealing to the Hindu scriptures, particularly the *Upanishads*. Clearly for us Westerners who do not already presuppose the inspiration of these scriptures, this reason will not carry much weight. Moreover, other Indian thinkers--such as the philosophers Ramanuja and Madhva--offer very different interpretations of the Hindu scriptures.

Second, followers of Sankara presented skeptical attacks on human reason that attempted to show that we have no adequate basis for trusting human reason. Moreover, they attempted to argue that our ordinary view of the world, which includes the belief in the distinctness of things and properties, is inconsistent.⁽⁵⁾ Since the practice of reason rests on making distinctions between things and properties, this latter set of arguments ultimately amounted to a further attack on human reason, namely that it is self-contradictory. Although the arguments they presented show great philosophical sophistication and insight, they ultimately cannot be used to support Sankara's philosophy. The reason for this is straightforward: if reason is ultimately invalid, then ultimately we cannot have valid reasons to believe anything, including Sankara's view. This is something that many followers of Sankara have recognized. Thus in the end many of them considered these arguments useful only as a way to help us break the grip that the ordinary view of reality has on us, thus preparing us for enlightenment (see Deutsch, p. 86 and 93-94).

The third sort of reason that followers of Sankara have offered in support of their position is an appeal to mystical experiences in which people purport to have a powerful and direct experience of the absolute unity of all things, including their self and Brahman. Purportedly, the validity of these experiences cannot be doubted once one obtains it. In critique of this line of support, however, philosophers such as William Wainwright (1988, p. 183) have pointed out that mystics in other religious traditions--including other branches of Hinduism--interpret similar sorts of mystical experiences in a very different manner. Thus, these experiences are not self-validating as advocates of the Sankara school often claim. Second, as argued above, even if one did have a powerful mystical "experience" of the absolute oneness of everything, advocates of the Sankara school would still offer the worst possible explanation of the sum total of our experiences, as discussed above, for they cannot explain our much more extensive ordinary experience of distinctions in reality. In contrast, by assuming the real existence of the world we see around us, we are able not only to explain our ordinary experiences, but also to explain the mystical experiences to which Sankara appeals. For example, we could explain these mystical experiences as either being valid experiences whose content has been misinterpreted, or as being a delusion generated by, among other things, the practices of meditation.

In order to address the apparent conflict between their view and our ordinary experiences, followers of the Sankara school invoke an idea they call *subration*. Roughly, one set of experiences *subrates* another set of experiences by rendering them in some way invalid. Dreams, illusions, and hallucinatory experiences are key everyday illustrations of this process: dreams are subrated (that is, rendered invalid) by our waking experiences, and hallucinations and illusions are subrated by the correct perceptual experiences of the world around us. Followers of this school then go on to claim that their monistic mystical experiences of the absolute oneness of all things subrates ordinary waking experience, but itself cannot be subrated by any other experience. Consequently, they claim, ordinary waking experience can no more count against their philosophy than dream experiences can count against our waking experiences.

One problem with their response is that it never really explains why the purported mystical experiences subrate ordinary experiences, instead of vice versa. Indeed, if you look at ordinary cases of subration, a central reason that we take one set of experiences to subrate another set is that, from within the framework of the first set of experiences, we can explain away the second set of experiences, but not vice versa. From the framework of our ordinary waking experiences, for instance, we can explain away an LSD addict's experience of an elephant flying around in her room as just a delusion generated by her brain, whereas our ordinary experience that elephants do not fly cannot be adequately explained away from within the framework of the hallucination. Thus, the hallucinatory experience is rendered invalid (subrated) by ordinary experience, but not the other way around. Similar things could be said for why dreams and illusions are subrated by ordinary experience. By this criterion, however, it follows that ordinary experiences subrate these purported monistic mystical experiences, but not the reverse. For, within the framework of ordinary experience we can explain their mystical experiences as a misinterpretation or as a delusion generated by the brain, but as we saw above, from the perspective of these purported mystical experiences we cannot account for our ordinary experiences of the world, not even by considering them an illusion. ⁽⁶⁾

Conclusion

Although our explication and analysis of Sankara's philosophy was brief, we uncovered severe logical problems with his core worldview. Moreover, as argued above, since Sankara's views conflict with almost all of our experiences, it seems that there cannot be any adequate reason to believe his system over standard Western views that assume the real existence of the world of distinct things and properties. In my judgement, none of these problems have been adequately answered by advocates of Sankara's position. Thus, I believe, we have much more reason to reject his core worldview than to accept it.

Ramanuja and Madhva Schools

Introduction

1. Similarities and Differences to Christian Theism

Unlike Sankara, both Ramanuja and Madhva took a realistic attitude toward the world, claiming that there are really distinct things and selves; thus, they denied Sankara's doctrine of *maya*. Moreover, they affirmed that Brahman is a personal God who is omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, timeless, perfectly free, and perfectly good and loving. In these ways, their belief systems are similar to that of the Western theistic

religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But beyond this, both of these schools have special similarities with Christianity. First, like Christianity, they believe that God has become incarnate in human history, though unlike Christians they believe that this has happened many times. For example, following the teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, they hold that during particularly dark periods of history, God becomes incarnate to "destroy the sin of the sinner and establish righteousness" (Prabhavananda, 1954, p. 133). Second, both of these schools strongly emphasize salvation by grace, though without any doctrine of Atonement. For instance, following an often repeated teaching of Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Ramanuja claims that we are saved by the grace that the Lord bestows on those who devote themselves to God in love and faith. Moreover, Ramanuja claims, this grace is so powerful that those who really devote themselves to God will achieve union with God and final liberation from the cycle of rebirths at the end of this life.

Yet, despite these similarities with Christianity, and Western theism, there are some major differences. Among these are: i) their adoption and reinterpretation of the polytheistic practice of devotion to many gods; ii) their belief in reincarnation and karma, along with the accompanying doctrine of the eternality of souls; iii) their belief in an eternally existing, cyclical cosmos; and iv) their denial of the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*, that is, creation out of nothing.

2. Creation Ex Nihilo and God's Relation to the World

Ramanuja's and Madhva's denial of *creation ex nihilo* bears some elaboration. Within the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* serves on the one hand to make God solely responsible for the world's existence, while at the same time guaranteeing the distinctness of the world from God. Denying this doctrine leaves two alternatives regarding the origin of the world: 1) the position that the world in some sense emerges out of God, like a spider web from a spider, or 2) the position the world in some sense exists independently from God. As we will see, Ramanuja chose the former alternative, whereas Madhva chose the latter.

Along with denying the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*, each of these thinkers had to incorporate two important scriptural teachings concerning Brahman's relation to the world. First, Hindu scriptures affirm some sort of identity, or at least a deep sort of unity, between Brahman and the world, particularly human souls. In fact one famous text--called the "identity text"--seems to affirm the absolute identity of Brahman and our deepest self, what the Hindus call *Atman*. Second, Hindu scripture, along with all traditional orthodox Hindu thought, affirms the absolute perfection of Brahman: for traditional orthodox Hindus, this means that Brahman does not commit any evil, Brahman does not suffer, Brahman is not ignorant, Brahman does not change, and Brahman is not limited in any way. The world, and human beings in particular, have all these supposed imperfections. Thus the problem Ramanuja and Madhva face is this: how to assert a unity between the world and God that is compatible with Hindu scripture, without allowing the imperfections of the world to take away from Brahman's perfections. If, for example, they were to claim that Brahman and the world are absolutely identical, then either Brahman contains imperfections and limitations, or the world as we know it is an illusion, as Sankara asserted. Since neither Ramanuja or Madhva wanted to accept either of these alternatives, they each assert that Brahman's relation with the world was something less than absolute identity. Let's start by looking at Ramanuja's view first.

Ramanuja's Account of God's Relation to the World

Like Sankara, Ramanuja affirms a deep sort of unity between God and the world, since he believed that this was clearly taught by scripture. Specifically, Ramanuja takes seriously the so-called "identity text" mentioned above, along with those many scriptural images and metaphors that assert that the world somehow emerges or issues forth out of Brahman. Unlike Sankara, however, Ramanuja believed that the Hindu scriptures, and common experience, also clearly teach the real existence of the world. As noted above, the difficulty for Ramanuja was to develop an account of the identity between God and the world

that did not at the same time either deny the existence of the world or compromise God's absolute perfection.

One way Ramanuja tries to develop such an account is by referring to the world as God's body. In calling the world God's body, however, Ramanuja should not be taken as saying that God is in any way limited by, or bound to, the world as we are to our bodies: Ramanuja is emphatic that God transcends the world, and is absolutely perfect and without any limitations. Rather, in saying that the world is God's body, Ramanuja simply means to affirm that the world is completely dependent on the God for its very being, and that God expresses his nature and brings about his purpose through the world, much as we do through our own bodies. As Ramanuja puts it, "that which [e.g., the world], in its entirety, depends upon, is controlled by and subserves another [e.g., God] and is therefore its inseparable mode, is called the body of the latter" (p. 76) Insofar as Ramanuja speaks of the world as God's body, therefore, his view of God's relation to the world seems perfectly compatible with Western theism.⁽⁷⁾

Elsewhere, however, Ramanuja seems to want to assert a deeper identity between the world and God, saying that the world, particularly sentient beings, are inseparable *aspects* or *modes* of God. At this point, Ramanuja's view becomes particularly hard to understand, since along with this assertion of an identity between world and God he also wants to assert that the world is really distinct from God. As we saw above, for instance, Ramanuja wants to assert that even though we suffer, God never suffers, and even though we commit evil acts, God never does. Thus, he wants to claim that we are really distinct centers of experience, will, and action from God. Indeed, one of the major schools of Ramanuja's followers held that we have true free will, and thus we, not God, are responsible for our actions. This sort of distinctness and distancing of selves from God, however, initially does not seem compatible with asserting that we are modes or aspects of God. It is therefore unclear whether in the end his view is coherent.

Attempts to provide a coherent interpretation of Ramanuja's thought in this regard nonetheless abound. My own attempt goes as follows. As far as I can tell, Ramanuja can reasonably be interpreted as saying that God is the source and locus of all *Being*. Imaginatively, this idea of *Being* could be thought of as something like a universal substance that underlies, and provides for the existence of all things; individual things are then the particular form and set of properties this "universal substance" of Being takes on. It follows, then, that if God is the locus of all Being then nothing has any Being apart from God, and insofar as a thing has being, it partakes of God's Being. On the other hand, the individual properties a thing has, or the activities in which it engages, are truly distinct from God. For example, insofar as souls undergo change, are ignorant, experience suffering, or commit evil acts, they do not partake of God. In some ways, one could think of God's relation to the world as analogous to the relation between a vine and its branches, with the vine, its sap, and the branches being analogous to God, God's Being, and the world, respectively. Just as the branches only have life insofar as they partake of the sap of the vine, so the world has being or existence only insofar as it partakes of the being or existence of God. Moreover, just as a leaf on a branch can dry up without the branch drying up, so things in the world can undergo suffering, ignorance, and the like without God undergoing any of these things.

Given the above discussion, we could summarize Ramanuja's views regarding God's relation to the world as follows: i) God freely, and beginninglessly, creates the world (and souls it contains) out of his own being; ii) God determines the karmic results that each soul will undergo because of its deeds in previous lives, and God beginninglessly causes our universe and other universes to undergo the cyclical process of formation, stasis, and dissolution; iii) The world, and the souls therein, are completely subservient to God and are completely dependent on God for their existence and ultimate fulfillment; iv) At their most fundamental level, that of their existence or Being, both the material world and souls are identical with God, though they are truly distinct from God in regards to their individual properties.

Madhva's Account of God's Relation to the World

To both protect God's perfection, and at the same time preserve the world's reality, Madhva went further than Ramanuja in distinguishing the world from God. Unlike Ramanuja, Madhva held that God is *neither* the source of the *being* of the world, nor any of the entities in the world. Rather, for Madhva, at least four kinds of things always existed as "brute givens" from all eternity: God, souls, non-intelligent substances, and the matter composing the physical world. None of these were derived from, or created by, any of the others, nor were they derived from any other being. Nonetheless, God does play a role in the development of the world and souls. In the case of the material world, God is responsible for each cycle of the cosmos. God is like a great potter who, during the formative phases of the cosmos, molds the matter into its various forms by giving it properties such as shape, size, and motion, and then destroys these forms in the dissolution phase. But like the potter's clay, the matter exists on its own apart from God, being a sort of found material that God uses. As for souls, God is the controller of the soul from within that enables the soul to fulfill its destiny, a destiny that is ultimately determined by the soul's inherent, uncreated nature. For most souls, this destiny is to escape the cycle of rebirths by achieving a union with God based on absolute love and adoration for God, but in which nonetheless the soul remains distinct from God. Unlike the rest of Indian thought, however, Madhva allowed for the possibility that the inherent nature of some souls dooms them to either eternal rebirths or everlasting hell.

Evaluation of Ramanuja and Madhva

At least on the surface, Ramanuja's and Madhva's view of God and God's relation to the world, along with their belief in reincarnation and karma, seem to be internally coherent. Moreover, the main Western arguments for belief in God, such as the design argument and the moral argument, seem to work as well for their view of God as the Western theistic view of God.⁽⁸⁾

Despite this, a serious problem arises for Ramanuja's (though not Madhva's) worldview when we consider his doctrine of the eternity of souls. This doctrine is not only taught by the Upanishads, but by all three schools of Vedanta and most of Indian philosophy. According to this doctrine, souls in this world have always existed in a state of bondage within the cycle of rebirths, undergoing an infinite number of past lives in the process. Moreover, at least for Ramanuja, while the universe goes through cycles of creation and then dissolution, souls continue to exist from cycle to cycle, though they exist in a state of stasis during periods of cosmic dissolution. Within and through each cycle, souls carry their baggage of good or bad karma into the next life, determining the conditions into which they are born.

Stated in terms of Christian terminology, Ramanuja's view implies that every soul that has ever existed endured an eternity in "hell" (i.e., the cycle of rebirths) before it could enter "heaven" (i.e., union with God). Now unlike Madhva, Ramanuja claims that God *freely*, and beginninglessly, created the world, and all existing souls, out of his own being. This latter claim, however, presents Ramanuja with a very severe problem of evil: that of reconciling his belief that God is perfectly good and all loving with God's ultimate responsibility for the beginningless existence of souls in a state of sin and suffering.

The problem of evil faced by Ramanuja here is much more severe than that faced by Western theists. First, unlike Western theists, Ramanuja cannot say that this evil is a necessary consequence of God's creating creatures with free will. Although the suffering of a soul in any individual life could be blamed on the bad karma resulting from its free choices in previous lives, the fact that the suffering is beginningless--and hence infinite--cannot be blamed on free choice. The reason for this is that, no matter what free choices souls make in this life, or have made in any previous life, they cannot change the fact that they have beginninglessly endured an infinite amount of suffering; but one cannot be responsible for what one was powerless to change. Followers of Ramanuja, therefore, do not seem to have recourse to the traditional free will theodicy invoked in the West to explain evil.⁽⁹⁾ Second, the amount of evil that needs to be explained is infinitely larger than that faced by Western versions of theism,⁽¹⁰⁾ since, according to Ramanuja each soul has committed an infinite number of evil acts and endured an infinite period of suffering. Unfortunately, as Julius Lipner points out, neither Ramanuja, nor any other orthodox Hindu theologian, ever attempted to

address this particular problem of evil since they took the eternity of the world and souls as an "unquestioned datum for life and thought" (p. 94).

Unlike Ramanuja (and Western theism), however, Madhva's theology largely avoids the problem of evil. The reason for this is that in his theology God is neither responsible for the beginningless existence of souls in a state of bondage, nor for the fact that they continue to remain in bondage, this being ultimately the result of their inherent, uncreated nature.⁽¹¹⁾ Nonetheless, his system suffers from two drawbacks when compared to Ramanuja's view. First, Madhva's system leaves one with a plurality of ultimates--souls, matter, and God--without accounting for their existence. Although this is not a devastating criticism of Madhva, everything else being equal, views that hypothesize a single, unified source of everything (such as God), are in virtue of their simplicity, philosophically more satisfactory. Second, even though Madhva claimed to base his view on scripture, from the perspective of many orthodox Hindus his theology seems to contradict both those passages of Hindu scripture that appear to imply a deep sort of identity between God and souls and those that appear to imply that the world emerges out of God.

Conclusion:

In my judgement Ramanuja's, and to a lesser extent Madhva's, worldview presents a philosophically viable alternative to that of Western theism and Christianity. Moreover, although Ramanuja's belief in the eternity of souls appears to present him with a serious problem of evil, it does not seem central to the rest of his worldview. Thus, I believe, he could reject this belief without having to give up any of his other central beliefs. (He might, however, have to give up his belief in the infallibility of the Hindu scriptures, since Ramanuja claims that it teaches this doctrine.) Accordingly, in my judgement it is unlikely that, solely based on general philosophical considerations, we can make a completely compelling case for preferring Christianity over Ramanuja's or Madhva's version of Hinduism. Rather, I believe, in making her case, the Christian apologist also will need to appeal to historical evidence, specifically historical evidence that Jesus really performed miracles, and really rose from the dead. In contrast, no relevantly equivalent sort of historical evidence can be found in support of Hinduism since it is not a religion founded on actual historical events.⁽¹²⁾

IV. BUDDHISM

Introduction

Buddhism was founded in India around 500 B.C. by Siddhartha Gautama, more commonly called the "Buddha," a term which means "the enlightened one." The oldest still surviving school of Buddhism is the *Therevada* school (pronounced: teh rah vaah dah, literally meaning "way of the elders"), which also is often called the *Hinayana* school (literally meaning "lesser vehicle"). By about 100 A. D, the second major school of Buddhism had developed, the *Mahayana* school (pronounced mah ha yah nah, meaning "greater vehicle"). Today, the Therevada school is primarily represented in Southeast Asia--Burma, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos--and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). The Mahayana school is represented in Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan, and has by far the largest number of adherents. Although Buddhism originated in India, it has effectively died out there since most of its basic beliefs and practices were absorbed into Hinduism. After briefly looking at some key doctrines the Buddha taught that are common to both schools, we will specifically look at Therevada Buddhism and then at Mahayana Buddhism.

The Buddha expressed his core teachings in what are known as the Four Noble Truths. The First Noble Truth is that *life is suffering*: "The Noble truth of Suffering is this: Birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow and lamentations, pain, grief, and despair are suffering...."⁽¹³⁾ Although Buddhists have often been accused of promoting an overly pessimistic view of life, a more charitable interpretation of the Buddhist notion of suffering is that it refers to any kind of dissatisfaction with life, not the sort of intense pain we normally associate with the word "suffering." In this sense, there is much truth to Buddha's First Noble Truth: by and large humans are dissatisfied, if not on the surface then at some deep level.

The Second Noble Truth is that the cause of this suffering is what Buddhists call *craving*. Often the Buddhist idea of craving is interpreted simply as *desire* thereby implying that Buddhists reject desires of any sort. If one interprets their doctrine more charitably, however, the heart of their doctrine seems to be that *attachment* is the cause of suffering, particularly attachment to one's own ego concerns. Consider, for instance, how much worry and dissatisfaction is the result of being attached to what other people think of us--we worry about how we look, about our status in life, about others getting ahead of us, and the like. Or, more generally, people's attachment to their own well-being in the future is an almost bottomless source of anxiety and dissatisfaction.

Given that attachment is the cause of suffering, it follows that to eliminate suffering, we must eliminate attachment. This is the Buddha's Third Noble Truth. Once we have eliminated attachment, we will achieve a state called *nirvana*, a state of pure bliss that escapes the cycle of rebirths. This is the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice.

Finally, as his Fourth Noble Truth, the Buddha taught that the way to eliminate attachment and gain nirvana is to follow the Eightfold Path, which essentially consists of practicing ethical/nonviolent behavior and more importantly, acquiring the correct view of one's self and the world. What is this correct view? For Buddha and his followers, it is that given by the Buddha's doctrine of impermanence. According to this doctrine, everything is impermanent in the sense that nothing lasts for more than an extremely brief period of time. Everything is in an almost complete state of flux, like a river. Applied to the self, the doctrine of impermanence implies that there is no enduring self that continues to exist for more than a brief moment. This denial of the existence of an enduring self lies at the core of Buddhist belief and is called the *annata*, or the "no self" doctrine. According to the Buddha, once we truly recognize the momentary nature of all existing things, especially the self, we lose all attachment and thus achieve the state of nirvana, either in this life or at the time of death. For the early Buddhists, this recognition could only come about through intense meditation which was entirely a matter of self-effort. We will see later, however, that a doctrine of grace developed in Mahayana Buddhism in which what are known as *Bodhisattvas* help one attain nirvana.

As explicated above, underlying the Fourth Noble Truth is the Buddhist claim that everything is impermanent, and thus that there is no enduring substantial self. These claims, however, were worked out differently in the two major schools, Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. I will examine each of these in next.

Theravada Buddhism

According to Theravada Buddhists, the self is like a candle flame. As we all know, a candle flame is simply a continuously flowing stream of heated molecules. Thus, if we consider the flame as nothing over and above the sum of its parts, then the candle flame is literally not the same flame from one moment; rather, from moment to moment, one aggregate of molecules is replaced by a new aggregate of molecules. Nonetheless, for convenience we say that the *same* flame continues to burn from moment to moment. Another useful analogy is a highway. Interstate 35 goes through Austin Texas and ends in Duluth Minnesota. Yet interstate 35 in Duluth is not literally the same piece of blacktop that passes through Austin

Texas, even though they are officially designated as the same highway. The reason we consider them the same is that we find it convenient to do so, especially given that they are continuously connected with each other. Similarly, Theravada Buddhists claim that the word "I" or "self" does not designate any truly enduring thing that continues to exist through time. Rather, in analogy to the candle flame, the self merely consists of a continuously flowing stream of discrete mental and physical elements, such as those of sensation, feelings, consciousness, and various body processes. These discrete elements could be thought of as the "molecules" that compose the self. Moreover, like the candle flame, from moment to moment, one aggregate of these discrete elements is replaced by a new aggregate, and consequently strictly speaking the "self" at one moment is being constantly replaced by a new "self" at the next moment. Under this view, therefore, what we call a person is really a succession of selves instead of a single enduring thing. As expressed by the Buddhist Monk Walpola Rahula,

what we call 'I', or 'being', is only a combination of physical and mental aggregates, which are working together interdependently in a flux of momentary change within the law of cause and effect, and that there is nothing permanent, everlasting, unchanging and eternal in the whole of existence. (1977, p. 66)

According to Theravada Buddhists, through meditation and right action we can eventually come existentially to recognize the momentary nature of the self, along with that of the rest of reality. Once we do this, attachment and hence suffering ceases, and we attain *nirvana*, either in this life or at the time of death.

Evaluation:

So far, the Theravada Buddhist story is at least initially plausible: the idea that suffering is (at least largely) the result of attachment, and that everything is impermanent makes tolerably good sense, at least on the surface. Indeed, as explicated so far the Theravada Buddhist's view of the self and reality is one that has been quite popular in the West among philosophers since at least the time of the famous Scottish philosopher David Hume. As we will see below, however, severe problems arise when this basic view of the self is combined with the additional traditional Buddhist doctrines of nirvana, rebirth, and karma. We will consider two of these problems.

1. Two Problems with Theravada Buddhism:

The first major problem that these doctrines present for Theravada Buddhists is that they seem to generate a tension, if not contradiction, at the core of the Buddha's teaching. On the one hand, to eliminate attachment to our own ego concerns, the Buddha denied the reality of an enduring self. On the other hand, in order to affirm justice in the world, he had to affirm the doctrines of rebirth and karma, according to which we reap the consequences of our present thoughts and deeds in a future life. Rebirth and karma, however, seem to require the existence of an enduring self: how, for instance, could we reap the fruits of our past deeds unless our self continued to exist in the future? Moreover, the doctrine of nirvana also seems to require the existence of an enduring self: if your self does not continue to exist from moment to moment, why bother trying to obtain nirvana? Thus, on the one hand, Theravada Buddhists deny the existence of an enduring self, but on the other hand their doctrines of rebirth, karma, and nirvana seem to require that the self continues to exist through time.

The second major problem traditional Theravada Buddhists confront is what could be called the "karmic management" problem. Traditionally Buddhists have believed that by and large the circumstances of one's

rebirth are determined by one's karma--that is, one's deeds, whether good or bad in this and previous lives. This, however, seems to require that there exist something like a "program" that arranges your genes, the family conditions you are born into, and the like to correspond to the moral worth of your past deeds. Such a program certainly would have to be highly complex and well-designed, much more so than any computer program that currently exists. The existence of such a karmic "program" would make sense if one believed in a God who created it, as Hindus do. But, traditional Theravada Buddhists do not believe in any such God. Thus, they are forced to simply assert that such a highly complex and well-organized system simply exists, and has always existed, as a "brute given." This, however, seems highly implausible: cases of such intricate apparent design, such as a watch, a computer program, or the human body, seem to require an explanation.

2. Attempts to Respond to the First Problem:

The standard Buddhist solution to the apparent contradiction between the no-enduring self doctrine and the doctrines of rebirth, karma, and nirvana begins by admitting that one's present self does not literally get reborn since it does not exist for more than a moment even in this life; rather, they claim, one's "karmic energy", that is, the set of fundamental personality traits and life energy (one's "candle flame"), gets transferred to some future fetus (Rahula, p. 33; Becker, p.9). Buddhists then go on to claim that although the future self is not strictly identical with our present self, it is not totally unrelated either. Thus, much as a candle flame which is passed from one candle to the next is neither the same candle flame nor a different candle flame, the future self can neither be said to be the same nor different from the present self. (Becker, p. 9, Griffiths, p. 105.)

Although this response might seem initially plausible, it faces two significant problems. First, it does not really resolve the problem. To see this, note that the major point of the doctrine of rebirth and karma is that we should not be lax about our behavior in this life, since we will pay the consequences in the next life. This, however, not only requires a degree of sameness of the future self with our present self, but it also requires that we really care about what happens to that future self. But the more Theravada Buddhists affirm that our future self is the same as our present self, and hence that we should care what happens to it, the more the whole point of their practice and metaphysics is undermined: namely, to eliminate concern about what happens to our self by realizing that it does not exist for more than a moment. Thus, simply asserting that our future self is in some sense the same as our present self does not resolve the apparent contradiction between the Buddha's no-self doctrine and the doctrines of rebirth, karma, and nirvana.

Second, even if the reborn self is in some sense the same as our present self, it does not seem to be sufficiently continuous with our present self to justify claiming that we are actually reborn. To see this, consider the following analogy to the Buddhist's account of rebirth explicated above in which one's karmic energy, basic personality traits (and perhaps one's memories in an unconscious form) get transferred to some future fetus. Suppose a mother dies during pregnancy, and through some futuristic technology her newly discovered biological energy and her basic personality traits are transferred to her unborn child. Further suppose that her memories are transferred to the unborn child in an unconscious form that will never be consciously accessible to the child. In such a case, we certainly would not say that the mother continued to survive in the unborn child, except perhaps in some loose or figurative sense of "survive." Rather, we would say that a future successor of the mother survived that shared her life energy, personality traits, and her memories in unconscious form.

3. Attempts to Respond to the Second Problem.

In response to the "karmic management" problem, some Theravada Buddhists, such as Alexandra David-Neel (pp. 188-190), suggest a weakened version of the traditional doctrine of karma in which one's thoughts and deeds in this life only affect the character of one's reborn self, not its life circumstances. According to David-Neel, those who do good deeds progressively develop a non-ego centered character that is better able to attain nirvana, and those who do evil deeds progressively develop a character addicted to their own ego centered desires. Although this weakened version of the doctrine of karma largely avoids the "karmic management" problem raised above, it does so at a cost. First, this version of karma runs against what tradition records the Buddha as teaching: namely, that the circumstances of one's birth are largely determined by the deeds of one's past lives. Second, by weakening the doctrine of karma, it tends to undercut Buddhist ethics; for, as University of Chicago Buddhist scholar Paul Griffiths points out, the doctrine of karma

provides the first-order prescriptions and proscriptions of Buddhist ethics (do not kill, do not steal, do not misbehave yourself sexually, and so forth) with their justification and sanction. If you do engage in such activities, you will suffer for them in this life or a future one, while if you fulfil your duties (giving to monks, developing compassion, and so forth), you will have a good rebirth (p. 106).

Finally, this weakened version of karma almost completely undercuts the traditional Buddhist explanation of why people are born in varied, and often seemingly unfair, life circumstances, such as that of poverty or wealth.

Conclusion:

In the above evaluation, I focused on what I consider some of the most vulnerable aspects of the core tenets of traditional Theravada Buddhism. Although the above critique has not definitively demonstrated that Theravada Buddhism is untenable, it does show that it runs into significant problems resulting from their belief in nirvana, rebirth, and karma, and thus that this form of Buddhism is less plausible than standard Western atheism. To see this, note that traditionally Theravada Buddhists have been atheists (or perhaps agnostics), since they do not believe in the existence of a creator God. Thus, unlike the theistic worldview, their worldview does not help explain the ultimate origin of the world, its apparent design, and the like. Instead, their worldview has the same drawbacks as standard Western atheism, along with the additional philosophical problems resulting from their doctrines of nirvana, rebirth, and karma, as elaborated above.

A Theravada Buddhist might respond to this conclusion by claiming that the problems that these doctrines present is compensated for by their positive merits, such as that they provide the basis for Buddhist meditational practices which in turn lead to peace and tranquility. In addition, they could argue, we have evidence that these doctrines are true both from the testimony of the Buddha and others who have achieved enlightenment, along with purported cases of memory of past lives. Personally, I find these to be fairly weak responses. The tranquility and peace that some Buddhists experience simply show that the meditational practices are often effective psychological techniques for producing these mental states, not that the doctrines of nirvana, rebirth, or karma are true. Moreover, in and of itself the appeal to testimony carries little weight considering that the founders, seers, and prophets of other religions give conflicting testimony: Why, for example, should we believe the Buddha's testimony over that of Jesus or the Apostle Paul, or some other venerated religious leader? Finally, these purported cases of past life memories at most provide evidence for the claim that some people are reborn; it does not provide evidence for the belief that everyone has gone through this cycle of rebirths for all eternity, or for the belief in karma and nirvana. But besides this, in my judgement the vast majority of reports of so-called past life memories can be easily explained without any appeal to the doctrine of rebirth.⁽¹⁴⁾

Another response Theravada Buddhists could give to this critique is to reject some of these traditional doctrines, particularly that of rebirth and karma, as some Western Buddhists seem to do. Without these doctrines, however, the core Theravada Buddhist worldview has no hope to offer to us beyond this life; instead, it begins to look like a fairly common Western atheistic worldview coupled with a unique form of meditative practice that purportedly helps us live a more serene, ethical, and integrated life in this world. Although having such a meditative technique might make such a version of atheism practically more attractive, it does not add to its plausibility as a worldview. I conclude, therefore, that neither the traditional Theravada worldview, nor the above Westernized version of it, offers a significant additional apologetic challenge to Christian belief over and above that offered by typical Western versions of atheism.

Mahayana Buddhism

Explication:

Mahayana Buddhism differs from Theravada Buddhism in two fundamental ways. First, Mahayana Buddhists stress that the only way to achieve nirvana for oneself is to strive to achieve it for all sentient beings. This is in contrast to Theravada Buddhists who by and large attempt to achieve nirvana for themselves. Moreover, this is why Mahayana Buddhists refer to themselves as the "greater vehicle" and to the Theravada Buddhists as *Hinayana* Buddhists, that is, "the lesser vehicle." Consequently, as a central element of their belief system, the Mahayana tradition developed the ideal of becoming a *Bodhisattva*, a fully enlightened being who has himself achieved nirvana, but because of his great love and power works to bring all other sentient beings to enlightenment.⁽¹⁵⁾

Along with this stress on love, Mahayana Buddhism developed a quite different view of reality than that of the Theravada Buddhists. Whereas Theravada Buddhists affirm the reality of the world and the real existence of many distinct things and properties, Mahayana Buddhists denied that any distinctions ultimately exist in reality. According to them, the world of apparent distinctions, with its separate selves, is a false perception of reality. Because reality is ultimately distinctionless, it cannot be truly grasped by thought, which operates by making distinctions and assigning things characteristics; ultimate reality can only be experienced by some sort of direct "mystical intuition."

One of the three major schools of this form of Buddhism, the *Madhyamika* school (pronounced: mah dhyah mee kah), expresses this idea by saying that anything that can be spoken of or thought about is empty of content or substantial reality; indeed, they claim, all statements are empty of meaning. Accordingly, they refer to the nature of ultimate reality as emptiness or the void, though in referring to reality in this way they do not intend to give a positive account of its nature. Enlightenment thus consists of fully realizing and experiencing this emptiness.

One reason *Madhyamika* Buddhist philosophers give for this "position" is that it represents the logical implication of the doctrine of impermanence taught by the Buddha. If all things are completely impermanent, they argued, then nothing could exist for more than an instant. But in order for something to have any real existence, they claimed, it must exist for some finite amount of time--that is, for more than an instant. Thus, they concluded, the whole idea of real, distinct things existing is self-contradictory. (See Chang, p. 71). Another motivation for this doctrine is that it seems to provide the necessary philosophical basis for the ultimate Buddhist goal of eliminating suffering through eliminating attachment. Unlike the Theravada Buddhist's account of reality which allowed for attachment to one's own "stream of future selves," the *Madhyamika*'s account eliminates the basis for any sort of attachment: once one fully realizes

that everything is empty of substantiality or meaning--including the "doctrines" of Madhyamika Buddhism--one realizes that there is nothing to which to cling, and hence attachment ceases.

The second and third major schools of Mahayana Buddhism are the *Ashvaghosa* (pronounced: ahsh vah gho shah) and *Yogacara* (pronounced: yoh guh cha rah) schools. Like the *Madhyamika* school, these schools deny the existence of any ultimate distinctions in reality, such as the distinction between one person and another. Unlike the *Madhyamika* school, however, they do not speak of the nature of reality in terms of "emptiness" or "the void." Rather, the *Ashvaghosa* school claims that reality is ultimately an undifferentiated, indefinable "something" (which they called *suchness*), whereas the *Yogacara* school provides a more positive account, identifying reality with *pure, distinctionless consciousness*. So, for instance, the *Yogacara* school claimed that every sentient being is identical with this pure consciousness, and thus that enlightenment is achieved by recognizing this identity through meditation.

As Buddhism penetrated deeply into China and adapted itself to Chinese thought, especially Taoism, a new school of Buddhism, *Ch'an* Buddhism emerged. This school in turn, eventually gained foothold in Japan in the thirteenth century, becoming what is known as *Zen* Buddhism. Today Zen Buddhism it is quite popular in the West. Like *Madhyamika* and *Yogacara* Buddhists, Zen Buddhists assert that human reason, thought, and language are ultimately invalid and indeed self-contradictory, and thus that they are a hindrance to enlightenment. After all, Zen Buddhists argue, if we are to experience the absolute oneness (or emptiness) of all things, we must get beyond language and reason, for the business of thought and language is to make distinctions and is thus directly opposed to the experience of enlightenment. (Language, for instance, distinguishes between red and green, big and small, intelligent and unintelligent, good and bad, and the like; and reason then uses these distinctions to draw conclusions.)

Despite their common belief in the inadequacy of reason, *Madhyamika* Buddhists and Zen Buddhists take different approaches to the use of reason. Even though they deny the ultimate validity of human reason and language, *Madhyamika* Buddhists nonetheless use philosophical arguments to expose the purported self-contradictory nature of reason and language, and thus break any attachment to it; these arguments are not meant to provide rational support for their position--since by their own admission reason is invalid--but are considered merely instrumentally useful tools that ultimately prove nothing. Zen Buddhists, on the other hand, reject philosophy and argumentation as a practical means to enlightenment and instead utilize a set of meditation techniques in order to break through the barrier of reason and language and achieve enlightenment. No doubt one of the most well-known of these meditational techniques is the Zen *koan*, a puzzling question or problem given to a Zen student that defies a rational solution. An often repeated example of a *koan* is the question "What is the sound of one hand clapping in the forest?" The theory behind this practice is that, by meditating on the *koan* in an attempt to find a solution, the Zen student will be forced to break through the categories of language and reason and in so doing experience *satori*, that is, enlightenment.

Evaluation of Mahayana Buddhism

Let's begin our critique with *Madhyamika* Buddhism. An obvious objection to the *Madhyamika* worldview is that it is self-refuting: if, as they claim, all statements are empty of meaning, then the statement that all statements are empty of meaning is itself empty of meaning, and thus does not assert anything about reality. Thus the purported truth of the *Madhyamika* Buddhist thesis about reality is inconsistent with itself. When this objection was raised by his contemporaries, the *Madhyamika* school's leading philosopher, Nagarjuna (second century A. D.), responded by saying: "I have no proposition, no thesis to defend (which may lack any essence). If I had any thesis, I would have been guilty of the faults you ascribe to me. But I do not, hence I have no fault" (Quoted in Matilal, 1986, p. 48).⁽¹⁶⁾ Nagarjuna's response has been typical of *Madhyamika* philosophers. On the one hand, *Madhyamika* Buddhists speak as though they are telling us what the true nature of reality is, but on the other hand, when pressed they end up denying that their philosophy is a view about reality at all. (More will be said on this below.)

More generally, because of their claim that reality is ultimately distinctionless, all schools of Mahayana Buddhism run into the same problems as the Sankara School of Hinduism. For example, if reality is ultimately characterless and distinctionless, then the distinction between being Enlightened and Unenlightened is ultimately an illusion, and even the distinction between illusion and reality is ultimately unreal. But their whole practice presupposes they are not. Otherwise, why bother trying to become enlightened? To respond to this critique, as some Buddhists do, by saying that we already are enlightened but just do not recognize it is not a sufficient answer. For this answer requires the existence of still another distinction: namely, that between knowing you are enlightened and not knowing you are enlightened.⁽¹⁷⁾

This inconsistency also penetrates into the Mahayana Buddhist stress on universal love of all sentient beings, as embodied in their ideal of becoming a *Bodhisattva*. This is something Westerners have found particularly attractive about Tibetan Buddhism as presented to the West by the Dalai Lama and others. But, as stated in a well-known passage from the *Diamond Sutra*, ultimately the Bodhisattva loves no one, since no one exists and the Bodhisattva recognizes this:

All beings must I lead to Nirvana, into that Realm of Nirvana which leaves nothing behind; and yet, after beings have thus been led to Nirvana, no being at all has been led to Nirvana. And why? If in a Bodhisattva the notion of a 'being' should take place, he could not be called a 'Bodhi-being'. And likewise if the notion of a soul, or a person should take place in him. (Trans. in Conze 1958, pp. 57-58.)⁽¹⁸⁾

The Mahayana Buddhist's stress on loving others, therefore, is inconsistent with their overall worldview, because ultimately their worldview implies that there is no one to love.

Conclusion

Perhaps the above discussion can best be summed up by noting that since Mahayana Buddhists deny the validity of reason, they could never legitimately offer a good reason to believe their view. Even if practicing some form of Mahayana Buddhism (such as Zen) dramatically improved the quality of one's life, that could not constitute a reason in favor of its truth. Moreover, since *Madhyamika* and Zen Buddhists deny the ultimate validity of any philosophical thesis, it is probably best not to even consider them philosophies, but rather as forms of practice designed to achieve a certain inexpressible, ongoing experience (Enlightenment) which radically alters one's orientation to the world. Even their seeming denial of the validity of all philosophical theses probably should not be taken as a claim about reality, but rather as a rhetorical device to get us directly to experience reality in a non-conceptual way. As one of today's most respected Zen masters and teachers, Thich Nhat Hanh, states,

The aim of *Madhyamika* is to reduce all concepts to absurdity in order to open the door of non-conceptual knowledge. It is not the intention of the *Madhyamika* to propose a view of reality in order to set it up in opposition to other views of reality. *All views*, according to the *Madhyamika*, are erroneous, because the views are not a reality. The *Madhyamika* is, therefore, proposed as a method and not as a doctrine (p. 121).

Similarly, philosopher John M. Koller notes concerning Zen Buddhism, "rather than trying to say what kind of philosophy Zen is, we should conclude that it is a way of approaching reality that constitutes an alternative to the intellectual way. The rational and philosophical approach, so well known in the West, is one approach. The existential and meditative way of Zen is another." (1970, p. 190) Considered in this way, these forms of Buddhism are not necessarily in conflict with Christian claims about the world, since they are not making any claims to begin with; they are simply an interesting and strange practice. (It could, however, be in conflict with Christian practice.)

OVERALL CONCLUSION

In the above analysis, we looked at the underlying worldview of the three major schools of Hinduism and Buddhism--the Sankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva schools of Hinduism, and the Therevada and Mahayana schools of Buddhism. We can summarize our conclusions in the following three points: i) Insofar as the Sankara school of Hinduism and the Mahayana school of Buddhism are interpreted as making positive claims about the nature reality, their core worldview seems to be ultimately incoherent; ii) The traditional Therevada Buddhist worldview is less plausible than a common form of Western atheism, and thus does not offer an additional apologetic challenge to Christians over and above that offered by Western atheism; iii) At least on the surface, the two theistic schools of Hinduism, the Ramanuja and Madhva schools, do appear to present a philosophically viable alternative to Western theism.

Given these conclusions are correct, we can draw several lessons from them for the Christian apologist. First, they undermine the key assumption of those so-called religious pluralists who claim that all of the major world religions have equally valid claims to being true. (See Chapter ?? of this book.) Second, the above points show that of all the major Eastern schools of thought we discussed, it is the two theistic schools of Hinduism that present a philosophically viable additional challenge to Christian belief. Finally, since the two other major world religions, Judaism and Islam, are theistic, the above conclusion suggests that the primary apologetic challenge the major world religions present Christianity is not that of challenging belief in a personal, omnipotent, all good God, but rather that of providing alternative conceptions of other aspects of the nature of God, along with alternative conceptions of God's relation to the world and of how God has acted in human history.

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NOTES:

1. ""'

2. See Radhakrishnan, 1923, p.34 and Puligandla, 1975, p. 234 for examples of this sort of response.

3. ³ For example, a response along these lines is given by Eliot Deutsch (Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction, 1969, p. 85).

4. ⁴ Some of Sankara's philosophical heirs, such as Sriharsa, clearly did not interpret Sankara in the way Ward suggests since they argued that the real existence of distinctions--whether between things or properties--is self contradictory. See Phillips, 1995, pp. 103-110.

5. For an explication and analysis of some of these arguments, see Phillips, 1995.

6. ⁶ Indeed, these mystical experiences are further analogous to a dream in that one is not even aware of ordinary experiences, much as in dream consciousness one is not typically aware of the contents of waking consciousness.

7. ⁷ Compare Ramanuja's claims here with the Christian claim that the Son of God sustains and upholds all things (e.g., Col. 1: 17), and the Apostle Paul's repeated claim that we are "the body of Christ" (Eph. 5:30), that is, the body of *God* the Son.

8. ⁸ The one exception to this is the traditional Western version of the cosmological argument, which fails in the case of Madhva's God.

9. For a detailed discussion of this theodicy, see chapter ___ on the problem of evil in this volume, especially pages ___.

10.

11. ¹¹ At first, one might wonder if this belief of his makes sense: if souls have already had an infinite number of past chances to gain release, shouldn't they have already done so by now? If one grants the coherence of Madhva's premise that souls with all kinds of inherent natures eternally exist as "brute givens," however, then his view really does appear to make sense. After all, one possible nature a soul could have is to be destined to beginninglessly (and hence for an infinite time) exist in a state of bondage, and then at some point in time gain release. So, one would expect to find these types of souls, along with other souls whose inherent nature dooms them never to attain release.

12.

13. From "Buddha's First Sermon," reprinted in Rahula, pp. 92-3.

14. ¹⁴ See Ian Wilson, 1987, Chapters 3 and 4, for a plausibly alternative explanation to reports of past life memories and a good critique of the evidence for rebirth.

15. Those Buddhists who have committed themselves to becoming such a fully enlightened being are also often called bodhisattvas.

16. ¹⁶ For a defense of Nagarjuna, see Matilal, 1986, chapter 2.

17. -

18. ¹⁸ Further, this love has traditionally not directly involved any kind of social action such as helping the poor, but simply is something one tries to cultivate inwardly in meditation.