

REL 1300: Evil in Hindu Thought.

Folder should contain:

- 1) Introductory material.
- 2) Extract from *A Source Book In Indian Philosophy*, edited by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles E. Moore (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957)
- 3) Francis Clooney, "Evil, Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom: Vedānta's Theology of Karma", *The Journal of Religion*, Vol 69, Number 4 (1989)
- 4) Whitley R. P. Kaufman, "Karma, Rebirth and the Problem of Evil", *Philosophy East and West*, Volume 55, Number 1 (2005)

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The most influential system of thought in Hinduism is Advaita Vedānta. “Vedānta” refers to the fact that this system is based on an interpretation of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads. “Advaita” means “non-dual”: there is only one reality, Brahman. Brahman is the soul of the universe – the single self that underlies all existence. The most important thinker of Advaita Vedānta is Śaṅkara, who may have lived from 788 to 820CE. Not all Hindus interpret their scriptures as Śaṅkara did: there are other forms of Vedānta. But he is probably the single most important thinker in the history of Hinduism, and that is why discussions of Hindu beliefs are frequently discussions of Śaṅkara’s beliefs. It is worth bearing in mind that Śaṅkara was responding to criticisms of Hinduism from Buddhists, amongst others. One way of responding to Buddhist criticisms was to argue that many of the ideas people found attractive in Buddhism were in fact part of Hindu beliefs all along. Śaṅkara wanted to show that these ideas could in fact be found in the Upaniṣads, when these texts are properly interpreted.

So, Śaṅkara believes that there is one true reality, Brahman, the soul of the universe. There is really only one single subject of consciousness. Suffering is the result of illusion – we fail to distinguish between self and objects, like someone who mistakes a rope for a snake. The fear that person feels is real, but when they realize their error, they will no longer be afraid. When I realize that I am, in fact, Brahman, the Eternal Self (as are you), then I will no longer have any reason for fear. It is through meditation that I must arrive at this realization. This realization is known as Mokṣa.

In this folder, you will find three readings.

First, is an extract from *A Source Book In Indian Philosophy*, edited by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles E. Moore (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957). I have taken the editors’ introduction to Vedantic thought, and the extract they have included from George Thibaut’s translation of *The Vedānta Sūtras With Commentary by Śaṅkarākārya*. The complete text of Thibaut’s translation is available on-line (look for Sacred Books of the East). Note that this book is a commentary: a sentence from the Vedānta Sūtra is followed by Śaṅkara’s commentary, which appears in a smaller font. Of course, Śaṅkara wrote in Sanskrit, with a different alphabet, which is why his name appears in different forms in English (Radhakrishnan and Moore refer to him as Śamkara).

Next, there is an article by Francis Clooney, “Evil, Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom: Vedānta’s Theology of Karma”, *The Journal of Religion*, Vol 69, Number 4 (1989). Clooney explains Śaṅkara’s views on karma. The word “karma” means “action”, and originally, it referred to the performance of rituals, and the effects that these rituals would have. Over time, it came to be used to indicate that good actions have good consequences and bad actions have bad consequences for the one who performs them – if not in this life, then when you are reborn in another life. When you achieve Mokṣa, you finally escape from all Karmic consequences.

So, the evil we experience is due to illusion, and by overcoming the illusion we escape the evil. Of course, as long as we are deluded, the feelings we have are real feelings. However, any bad feelings we have are part of the system of Karma. Clooney explains that part of

Śaṅkara's distinctive teaching is that karmic consequences are not the automatic result of a mechanical process, they are controlled by Brahman.

Clooney's essay explains Śaṅkara's thought. The third extract you will find here is an article by Whitley R. P. Kaufman, "Karma, Rebirth and the Problem of Evil", *Philosophy East and West*, Volume 55, Number 1 (2005). Kaufman is concerned not to explain Śaṅkara's ideas, but to evaluate the general notion of Karma as a solution to the problem of evil. He argues that western thinkers have not generally subjected the doctrine of Karma to the same kind of philosophical scrutiny that has been applied to monotheistic responses to the problem of evil.