



**Indian Theodicy: #a#kara and R#m#nuja on Brahma S#tra II. 1. 32-36**

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A. L. Herman Indian theodicy: Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja  
on Brahma Sūtra II. 1. 32-36

Whatever other differences the two major proponents of Vedānta may have, they reach a high accord in their comments on Bādarāyaṇa's *Brahma Sūtra* or *Vedānta Sūtra* II. 1. 32-36.<sup>1</sup> This high accord centers on the proper treatment, handling, and solution of what in the West is called "the problem of evil" and in particular "the theological problem of human evil." Both Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja deal with the problem of evil elsewhere in the *Brahma Sūtra bhāṣyas*, where the question is taken up as to whether or not Brahman's nature is compromised by the imperfect world,<sup>2</sup> but nowhere else does their treatment reach the high pitch and sustained philosophic force as in the passages under discussion here.

The principal question taken up in *B.S.* II. 1. 32-36 is whether or not Brahman (God) created the world. The answer that both Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja give is in the affirmative. But the way to that answer provides us with some highly interesting philosophic jousts with the problem of evil, and some entertaining answers to numerous insistent objectors along that way. Let me take the *sūtras* one at a time, freely translate each of the five, and then attempt to explain what is going on as that going-on is understood by Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja. The program of argument here calls for certain unnamed objectors supporting the thesis that God cannot be the cause of the world, followed by replies from the opponents of this view, Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja. In each case, the latter two Vedāntists build up the objector's position with reasonable arguments and then attack these arguments with reason and scripture (*śruti* and *smṛti*).

Bādarāyaṇa opens with the summary of an objector's argument:

- II. 1. 32. Brahman cannot be the cause of the world because to cause or create involves motives or purposes (and if Brahman has either, He is imperfect).

Śāṅkara puts the argument supporting the objector's conclusion into the form of a dilemma: "Either God had a purpose or he didn't, a motive or not." If "purpose" is rendered "desire," I think the force of the objection can be

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<sup>1</sup> *Brahma-Sūtra Śāṅkara-Bhāṣhya*, Bādarāyaṇa's *Brahma-Sūtras* with Shankarācharya's commentary, trans. V. M. Apte (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1960), pp. 337-342; *The Vedānta Sūtras of Bādarāyaṇa with the Commentary of Rāmānuja*, trans. George Thibaut, Sacred Books of the East, ed. F. Max Müller, vol. 48, pt. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), pp. 477-479. In addition to the foregoing commentaries, I shall be relying on the Sanskrit text in *The Brahma Sūtra, The Philosophy of Spiritual Life*, trans. S. Radhakrishnan (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960), pp. 361-365. Quotations from these three works will be identified by 'S', 'R', and 'Rk', respectively.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., *B.S.* II. 1. 21-29.

seen in a number of interesting ways, and ways that relate to what might be called “the creator paradox.” For if God created the world, He did it for a purpose. If He had a purpose then He desired some goal. But if He desired something, then He was lacking something. But if He lacked something, then He’s not perfect, that is, not wholly fulfilled. Śaṅkara summarizes this objection, which he and Rāmānuja will shortly attempt to answer, as follows: “Now, if it were to be conceived that this endeavor of the Highest Self is useful to itself because of its own desire, then such supposition would contradict the scriptural statement about the Highest Self being always quite contented.”<sup>3</sup> Thus that horn of the dilemma leads to a contradiction.

But suppose Brahman created without a purpose. This way, too, there is a problem. For to act without purpose is in effect not to *act* at all. And if creating is an act, then one could not create without some purpose. A contradiction results: If one tries to create without purpose, then one cannot create, for to create means to act purposefully. God ends up purposelessly purposing, a contradiction. Śaṅkara states this horn of the dilemma as follows: “If, on the other hand, one were to conceive no such purpose (behind such endeavor), one would have to concede that (in such a case) there would not be any such endeavor. . . .”<sup>4</sup> In summary, if God creates with purpose, then this act exposes a glaring inconsistency in the nature of God. On the other hand, if God tries to create (endeavor, desire, act) without desire, endeavor, or action, this proves contradictory and impossible. But must we be hung on these horns? No. Bādarāyaṇa slips between them followed by a host of Vedāntins. Both of our commentators must step a narrow line in what follows: first, between having God as the cause of the world while avoiding the conclusion to which the creator paradox leads; and second, having God as the cause of the world while avoiding the conclusion that God brought evil into it since He was the cause of it. The latter puzzle is, of course, the problem of evil.

II. 1. 33. But as with men at times, so with God, creation is a mere sport.

Sport (*līlā*) is understood here to be a third sort of activity. It is therefore neither purposive nor purposeless, those words being inapplicable to what God’s sport is really like. Śaṅkara uses the example of breathing—it is not an act of will but follows simply “the law of its own nature.”<sup>5</sup> Thus *līlā* prompts creation out of sheer joy, an overflowing from God’s great and wonderful sportive nature. We have here, then, a solution of sorts to the problem of evil. It amounts to saying that while evil exists in the creation, it cannot be due to its “creator,” since what He did was not really an act of creation

<sup>3</sup> *S*, p. 337.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *S*, p. 477.

at all; the creation is a kind of playful overflowing of His joyful inner nature. Suppose we call this “the evil-in-the-world-is-not-from-God-who-did-not-create-it-but-merely-sported-it solution” or “the *līlā* solution.” Rāmānuja speaks to the *līlā* solution with an entertaining example: “We see in ordinary life how some great King, ruling this earth with its seven dvīpas, and possessing perfect strength, valor, and so on, has a game at balls, or the like, from no other motive than to amuse himself. . . .”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it is not in creation alone that *līlā* is evidenced, but in the world’s ultimate destruction as well: “. . . there is no objection to the view that sport only is the motive prompting Brahman to the creation, sustentation, and destruction of this world which is easily fashioned by his mere will.”<sup>7</sup> Some comments follow on this attempted solution to the problem of evil.

1. The Vedāntists actually don’t need the *līlā* solution to counter objections raised by the problem of evil. All objections can be handled rather neatly, we shall see, by what we shall call “the rebirth solution.” For, as we shall show, all superhuman, human, and subhuman suffering or evil can be explained or adequately accounted for by the rebirth solution, together with one or two slight additions involving, for example, the nonbeginningness of the world.

2. *Līlā* solves nothing as far as the problem of evil is concerned, for while *līlā* may be a purposeless act, it is surely an activity about which we can ask, Who did it? That is to say, labeling *līlā* as mere motiveless, goalless sport, sensible enough in itself, does not rule out asking, Whose intention was it to engage in this motiveless activity? God is not responsible for the purposes in *līlā*, for supposedly there are none, but He is surely responsible for the act that brings *līlā* into existence. Let me make this clearer. Suppose I am going to play a game. Suppose the game I play is like observing a work of art, an aesthetic activity, in which there are no goals, purposes, or ends, but just activity for activity’s sake, enjoyment without repercussions (that is, I am not doing it to win a prize, raise my blood pressure, impress my peers, or work up a sweat). But while I have no desires raised and satisfied in the aesthetic or game activity itself, I did have an antecedent desire and it was only realized when I subsequently played the game. If we distinguish between the play as activity, aesthetic in itself, and the play as a-something-to-be-done, a goal in itself, then we can see that the former is consequenceless and goalless at the time the activity is going on, and since there is no motive being satisfied, it is like *līlā*-play without purpose. However, the latter, involving a decision to play, the getting of the ball, the going to the museum, the bringing about of the act of play, aesthetic indulgence, or *līlā*, surely has a goal or

<sup>6</sup> *Rj*, p. 477.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

aim, namely, goalless or aimless activity. I am not responsible for the purposes in *līlā*, for there are none. But I am responsible for the act that brings *līlā* about. Thus I may be responsible and to blame for what happens after *līlā* is over, or after separate acts of *līlā* have been made.

3. I bounce a ball on the wall. My neighbors are annoyed. They say, Why did you bounce the ball? I say, I had no purpose. They say, but your bouncing keeps our baby awake, disturbs our reading, frightens my wife, angers my mother-in-law, cracks our walls. Now, can I say, I'm not to blame—I was only playing, and we all know there are no purposes in playing? That would be silly. What am I responsible for? The bouncing. Does the bouncing bother anyone? No. It's the noise from the bouncing that bothers. Could I conceivably argue that I'm not responsible for the noise? Nonsense. In the act of play, from my point of view, what I do is without purpose. From my neighbor's point of view, what I do has results that are all too evident.

4. I pull the wings and legs off a baby bird, as Richard Brandt has said Navajo children do in their play. Someone says, What are you doing? and I say, Playing. I have not excused my act, only described it. Granted that in a game the purpose is lost, that is, the game's purpose is lost in the game, to say this does not excuse what results from the game, but simply labels a certain sort of activity, and rules out silly questions like, Why are you playing a game? Thus to describe God's activity as *līlā* is to describe the play act from two possible points of view. From God's point of view, it is a description of a purposeless, aimless play, without motives, without intentions. But from the neighbor's point of view, from the suffering bird's point of view, *līlā* is fraught with effects and consequences that are undesirable. *Līlā* cannot be used to justify the results that follow from the act; *līlā* merely describes the act. The Vedāntists have mistaken the description of *līlā* for a justification of *līlā*.

5. While one cannot ask, Why are you playing that game? after one has been told that a game is being played, one can, nonetheless, ask, Why are you playing that game that way? If I move the king two places in a chess game (and I am not castling) and you say, Don't you know the rules of chess?, your question would be quite legitimate. If the game has rules and one violates the rules, one can ask, What game are you playing? If God plays a game of creation, and seems to violate rules for playing the creation game, we might very well ask, Doesn't He know the rules of the game of creation? I assume this question is at the very heart of the problem of evil. And philosophers are notorious for having all sorts of legitimate suggestions for better ways of playing, and better rules for, the creation game.

6. Some games which one plays in a sportive mood can be won or lost. Chess and most card games can be played to such a conclusion. Some games, like bouncing a ball on my neighbor's wall, cannot be played to a winning or

losing conclusion. But all games can be played better or worse, with greater or less facility, more or less joy, commitment, playfulness, indulgence, and what-have-you. "A man full of cheerfulness on awakening from sound sleep dances about without any motive or need but simply from the fullness of spirit, so is the case with the creation of the world by God."<sup>8</sup> But such a joyful man can dance poorly or well, better this time than last. To leap out of bed and dance on the sides of one's feet, clumsily, is no good at all. One can learn to express one's sportive feelings better than that. Practice in expressing joy is possible and necessary to true joyfulness. If I leap out of bed, overflowing with *Gemütlichkeit* or *Freude*, and then trip all over my feet in expressing my feelings, I am not going to be very joyful for very long. One expresses one's joy and sorrow, and one's feelings in general, in appropriately tried and tested ways: at the piano, singing in showers or cars, kissing and hugging friends or one's self. One can get better at such expressions, just as one can improve one's self in other purposeless or goalless activities, like games. It is therefore legitimate to ask, When Brahman, through *līlā*, expressed His joy, why didn't He do it better? If He is perfect He could, and if He's good He would want to, so why didn't He? We are back once again to the problem of evil.

7. Śaṅkara's example of breathing is curious, but the same question raised above can be applied to it. Some people are poor breathers—"shallow breathers," my physician calls them. They breathe at the very top of their lungs; their rate of respiration, instead of the normal sixteen per minute, runs twenty-five to thirty. They must breathe fast, for only one-fourth to one-third of their lung's capacity is being used. They are bad breathers—but they can be taught to breathe better. Looking at the creation, one could ask of Brahman, Why didn't He learn to breathe out or in better? Once more we are back to the problem of evil. Thus the *līlā* ploy solves nothing.

Finally, as we have seen, Rāmānuja adds another dimension to the *līlā* story that will make the problem of evil stand out even more strongly: ". . . sport alone is the motive prompting Brahman to the creation, sustentation, and destruction of this world. . . ."<sup>9</sup> That other dimension is the dissolution (*pralaya*) of the universe, for Brahman, in His/Its trinitarian role of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, is of course the exhaler (Brahmā), the sustainer (Viṣṇu), and the inhaler or destroyer (Śiva) of the universe. Thus if Brahman's play involves not simply creating and maintaining the universe, but if Brahman is the great destroyer as well, and if that too is play, then Brahman's putative sins are far grander than those ever imagined by any Western theologian with respect to Deity. The Vedāntist has his work cut out for him, indeed.

<sup>8</sup> *RK*, p. 362.

<sup>9</sup> *Rj*, p. 477.

But as I have tried to indicate, the Vedāntists have another theodical card to play that seems to get them out of the problems raised by *līlā*.

II. 1. 34. Discrimination (treating beings unequally) and cruelty cannot be attributed to God, for He is aware of the Karman of beings; and the Scriptures say so.

The objector, as interpreted by Śaṅkara, opens his case by saying: "It is not reasonably sustainable that the Lord is the cause of the world, because there would result the predicament of (the fault of) discrimination and cruelty (attaching themselves to the Lord). . . ." <sup>10</sup> In the West a distinction is frequently made between evils *caused* by man and evils *endured* by man as sin and suffering, respectively, Augustine's distinction between *peccatum* and *poena*. The objector tells us here that both sin and suffering could be attributed to God if God were indeed the Creator of the world. The objector then continues with another example of evil—call it "cosmological evil"—that we have seen above in Rāmānuja's commentary. Śaṅkara's objector, in his turn, says: "Similarly by his inflicting misery and by destroying all his creation, faults of such pitilessness and cruelty, as would be abhorred even by a villain, would attach themselves to the Lord."<sup>11</sup> Then the objector concludes again that the Lord cannot be the cause of the world. The cyclic act of absorptive destruction is on a scale so vast that, aside from rather curious cosmologies such as those of Empedocles, the Stoics, and Friedrich Nietzsche, it has no strict parallel in the West, unless one counts the biblical Armageddon and Flood, or the Last Judgment as envisioned by Albrecht Dürer. This mythical vision of destruction and de-evolution, this horrendous cosmological display of the Lord's ferocious and destructive side, comes closest to what Leibniz would call "metaphysical evil," and to what Augustine on a human scale had called "original sin." Both metaphysical evil and original sin intend an imperfection inherent in the basic cosmic stuff or material, respectively, in the universe and man, because of the fact that though each was created by God, each fell short of the perfective majesty of God. Each may be good, but, as Augustine and Leibniz are at pains to try to bring across, each is nonetheless imperfect.

There is undoubtedly confusion here between metaphysical imperfection and moral imperfection such that, given the first, the second does not necessarily follow in the way Augustine and Leibniz thought it did. But the objectors Śaṅkara serves up to us do not have that problem. They are not caught in any such confusion since their point is not so much that the creation is good or bad (they do not say) but that, whatever its moral or meta-

<sup>10</sup> *S*, p. 339.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

physical nature, it has to be destroyed. Since nearly all Hindus accept the cyclical theory of history and cosmology, there would indeed seem to be a problem: the Lord does destroy the creation, men, animals, gods, the whole glorious and inglorious works. Hence with this cosmological or metaphysical evil we have three distinct formulations of the problem of evil, since we have three evils: human evil, superhuman evil, and subhuman evil. Thus the objector's case.

The form this evil takes comes closest to certain doctrines of metaphysical evil in the West, as I said, but only because the scale, the sheer quantity of each, is the same. However, Indian attitudes toward the quality of the creation are far different, particularly for those cosmogonies that see nature, man, animals, and the gods as all having been created from a similar substance. Thus both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja argue at *B.S.* I. 4. 26 that the creation is Brahman since Brahman is the material cause of the creation; Śaṅkara uses the analogy of clay and the pots made from the clay, and at *B.S.* I. 4. 27 he uses the example of the spider (Brahman) and its thread (world) to make his cosmogonic point. Rāmānuja is more cautious in these passages, realizing as he does that the evil in the creation could be attributed to Brahman if the connection between them is too close. Especially in *B.S.* I. 4. 26 and 27, this threat seems more than obvious to him. He agrees in the latter commentary that Brahman has the entire universe for Its body, but the universe is the result of Brahman modifying (*pariṇāmayati*) Itself "by gradually evolving the world-body." Both authors agree that Brahman is modified in some way, but the question remains, Has It been modified sufficiently to escape the problem of evil with respect to the creation?

The cosmogonic theory most prevalent in Western metaphysical theories, creation *ex nihilo*, avoids a "pantheism" by stressing the absolute separation between creator and creation, but leaps faith-first into the nasty tangles that Augustine and Leibniz get into: If the creation is imperfect, how can you still call it good? and, How could a perfect Creator create an imperfect universe? This gulf between man and God, inherent in most Western theological cosmogonies, is reflected in the theological dogma regarding the utter transcendence of God, the absolute dependence and depravity of man, and the agonizing sense of guilt and the necessity for atonement that pervade most classical Western religions. Indian religions, perhaps because of their cosmogonic theories, do not have these particular problems.

From *B.S.* II. 1. 34, we thus far have *two* objections to the Lord's being the cause of the world: first, that the Lord would be responsible for evil in the world, and second, that the Lord would be responsible for the destruction of that world. Let us call the first the "discrimination and cruelty argument," and the second the "destruction argument." Both arguments, as we have seen, lead to the problem of evil in all three of its formulations. Rāmānuja expands



on the discrimination and cruelty arguments in an interesting way, expertly displaying the two parts of this argument. Call the first part “the discrimination argument.” Objectors, according to Rāmānuja, would say: “But the assumption of his having adequately created the world would lay him open to the charge of partiality, insofar as the world contains beings of high, middle and low station—Gods, men, animals, immovable beings. . . .”<sup>12</sup>

The discrimination argument is frequently expressed in the form, Why was I born poor? blind? a *Sūdra*? lame? with such and such defect?, when other persons I know are not poor, blind, *Sūdras*, lame, or defective. In other words, if the Lord is impartial and just, why are there such terrible inequalities in the creation? Doesn’t God play favorites? Therefore, isn’t He partial, unjust, and therefore imperfect?

The second part of this argument, call it “the cruelty argument,” is also familiar to us, and Rāmānuja states it simply that God would be open to the charge “. . . of cruelty, insofar as he would be instrumental in making his creatures experience pain of the most dreadful kind. . . .”<sup>13</sup>

The arguments thus presented by the imagined objectors of both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja come down then to the discrimination argument, the cruelty argument, and the destruction argument. All three, as we have seen, lead to the problem of evil, for they respectively embroil the perfect majesty of the Lord with injustice, cruelty on a micro-scale, and cruelty on a macro-scale. But all three are apparently neatly handled by Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja with the same counterargument, that is, the rebirth solution. Śaṅkara says:

The Lord should rather be looked upon to be like ‘rain’. Just as rain is the general cause which makes rice and barley grow, while the different potentialities inherent in their seeds, are the cause of the disparity between such rice and barley, even so in the creation of Gods and men etc. the Lord is but the general common cause only [see below], while for the inequality between Gods and men etc., they have their own different individual actions as the cause. . . .<sup>14</sup>

Rāmānuja explains further that it is because of *karman* that different potentialities inhere in men, and that whatever happens to men is due to their own previous actions. Quoting “the reverend Parāśara,”<sup>15</sup> he says: “He (the Lord) is the operative cause only in the creation of new beings; the material cause is constituted by the potentialities of the beings to be created.”<sup>16</sup> Rāmānuja adds that “potentiality” here means *karman*. There then follow from both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja references to the scriptures.

<sup>12</sup> *Rj*, p. 478.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ś*, p. 340.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* I. 4. 51-52.

<sup>16</sup> *Rj*, p. 478.

The key to the Lord's escaping complicity in cruelty and evil lies in the phrase "operative cause" for Rāmānuja, or "general common cause" for Śaṅkara. It can best be understood by returning to Śaṅkara's rain and grain analogy. Seen in this light, the Lord emerges as the beneficent and benevolent gentle rain that drops from the heavens, watering the just and the unjust alike. In philosophical parlance, God looks like a necessary but not a sufficient condition for growth or evil in the world, hence He seems relatively blameless; for the true motivating or dynamic forces of creation, maintenance, and destruction in the universe are the transmigratory souls themselves which are *karman*-driven, returning lustfully and thirstily to the source of their longings, the trough of the wicked world. Some comments are in order on *B.S.* II. 1. 34.

1. It is easy to see how the discrimination argument and the cruelty argument can be handled by the rebirth solution. The conditions of birth, and the evils and goods attendant upon them, can all be laid to *karman* and the various cosmic processes operating seemingly independently of the Lord. What ill befalls you, that you deserve. It is true that God cannot help you—the *karman* must be played out. It is also true that this seems severely to limit God's power: for if there is indeed a cosmic force, *karman*, and cosmic results of this force, *saṁsāra*, operating independently of the will of God, then God's power would seem to be curtailed. But just as Saint Thomas's God could not raise an unraisable stone, or make tomorrow occur today, so also it might be countered here that Brahman cannot make the universe unjust. And surely to alter karmic laws for one's own purposes would make that universe unjust. Thus the rebirth solution might counter the arguments of discrimination and cruelty while at the same time it produces some puzzles regarding the conjunction of God's love and mercy (let no man suffer) with God's justice (let no man suffer purposelessly). The rebirth solution, however callously employed, can thus be used to explain and justify the most abominable cruelty. But can it justify cosmic cruelty, that is, can it satisfy the destruction argument?

2. Why must the entire universe be dissolved? Why must the *Kali Yuga*, with all its attendant woes and ills, be followed by even greater woes and ills issuing in the supreme cataclysmic climax? Two answers are open to the theological cosmologist turned theodicist:

a. The world is so supremely wicked at this point, so thoroughly filled up with wanton, unregenerate, unrealized souls, that *mokṣa* for any of them is impossible, and the *līlā* must consequently end. It may therefore be good of God to stop all that wickedness, to relieve the sufferings of all those unfortunate souls.

Thus the Lord is in complete control, He sees the way things are, and by

an act both merciful (to end their suffering) and just (they deserved this end) He throws the switch and the dissolution occurs. Here again rebirth would or could counter the destruction argument.

b. The Lord has no choice. The cosmic process is automatic, so that after the required number of years have passed, the *Kali Yuga* arrives and the process of disintegration and dissolution and destruction must occur whatever God's feelings in the matter.

One is reminded of Plotinus, of course. The process of manifestation is such that the farther away from the One the creation evolves, the more non-Being it has, the more instability it contains, the more evil it manifests, until like a ball on a rubber band having expanded to its greatest permissible length, it suddenly springs back to its source. This answer throws us once again into the old puzzle about limitations on God's powers mentioned above in 1. For it would seem that universal cosmic processes are at work such that God could not suspend them. This may mean a limitation to His powers, or it might again simply be a case of God's being unable to do anything contrary to His nature without involving Himself in self-contradiction. The cosmologists must, it seems, worry over this problem if the rebirth solution is to answer the problem raised in the destruction argument. If the Lord is responsible for the end and the end contains evil, then it would seem *prima facie* that the Lord is responsible for evil. How responsible? Indians themselves differ as to whether or not the law of *karman*, and presumably other cosmic laws as well, are controlled by God. The *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* and Aurobindo Ghose, among others, maintain that the law of *karman* is in varying degrees apparently under the guidance and control of God since *adṛṣṭa* alone is unintelligent and consequently cannot produce the proper, that is, just effects. But in Jainism, Buddhism, the Sāṅkhya, and the Mīmāṃsā "the law of *karman* is autonomous and works independently of the will of God."<sup>17</sup> This produces for the Indian theodist a curious dilemma, which I call "the *saguna* paradox": If God is in control of the law of *karman* then He is involved with the suffering and misery dispensed through or by way of the law; thence the problem of evil with its gnawing consequences. If, however, God is not in control of the law of *karman*, and it works independently and autonomously of God, then God is not all-powerful, since an impersonal and autonomous force is somehow one of the conditions for suffering and misery. The theodist welcomes neither conclusion.

3. This brings us to Śaṅkara's analogy: God is like rain; the help rain gives is, in the language of Thomas Aquinas, for example, merely permissive

<sup>17</sup> Satischandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1950), p. 17.

and not causative (in the sense that it is not responsible). But what happens to an argument like the permissive argument in a theodicy like St. Thomas's? Thus even to permit evil when you have the power and nature to stop it is immoral. Some comments on Śaṅkara's way out:

a. God is not like rain, for the analogy can be twisted all to pieces from the simple fact that rain is neither all powerful, all knowing and beneficent, nor benevolent; it's just wet.

b. Rain is the occasion for seed growth, but rain does not know that this seed contains, let us say, ergot; rain does not know that more than 1 percent ergot in feed grain or wheat flour can cause tissue damage and death due to alkaloid poisoning in animals and humans. But these are things that the Lord presumably knows. To know this, to have the power to prevent it, and not to prevent it is surely, to say the least, curious and inconsistent, if not downright immoral.

c. If God is an "operative" or "general common cause," what does this mean? To say that God is a necessary condition to seed growth, like rain or water, will not do. For if we make God's will, hence God, a full-fledged necessary condition for evil, then God is morally responsible for evil, just as rain is physically responsible for growth. But while we cannot blame rain for the seed's growth even with physiological ergotism as the outcome, we can blame God who, unlike the rain, could have prevented the evil because of His peculiar moral properties. To make God a causal factor at all, in whatever sense, would lead to His complicity with, His responsibility for (in a strictly personal-human sense), and thence His blameworthiness in the resulting situation.

4. If God is either implicated in the end (hence blamable) or merely a pawn in the hands of uncontrollable cosmic processes (hence not all-powerful), it would seem that He is also involved in both of these ways in the beginning of the creation or the origin of the universe. Thus suppose we grant that the rebirth solution takes care of the three arguments advanced above, so that my life today with its constituent suffering is the result of my previous life. There is a kind of sense to this, and despite the puzzles, even a sort of justice to it such that one must come to admire the ingenuity and boldness of the rebirth solution face to face with the problem of evil. But what about the origin of evil? In particular, What about a pure unsullied soul at the beginning, in the Golden Age, at the start of it all? What then brought about evil? I could not be responsible for that, because I was not there before event number one to make my fall the product of *karman* and rebirth. Thus Radhakrishnan puts the objection: "Many passages in the *Upaniṣads* tell us that 'In the beginning there was Being only, one without a second'. There was no *Karma* which had to be taken into account before creation. The first creation at least should have been free from inequalities."<sup>18</sup> So where did they come from? God? But this objection, surely a familiar one to Westerners, is parried by the Vedāntists in the *sūtra* that follows:

<sup>18</sup> *Rk*, p. 364.

- II. 1. 35. If it is objected, that in the beginning there could have been no differences, and the Lord must then be responsible for the differences (good and evil) that came, then we counter, there is no beginning.

Radhakrishnan speaks to this conclusion: "The world is without beginning. Work and inequality are like seed and sprout. They are caused as well as causes."<sup>19</sup> Śaṅkara agrees that the objection stated above in 4 would indeed stand as valid, if it were not for the beginninglessness of the world. Using the seed and sprout example mentioned previously, he concludes that action and creation are like the seed with its sprout that gives rise to seed again, and so on and so on: "But transmigratory existence being beginningless, there need not be any objection for action and the variety of creation, to act, alternately as cause and effect of each other, like the seed, and the sprout. . . ."<sup>20</sup>

But now a fundamental difference between Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja emerges. Rāmānuja, quoting the *śruti*, argues that the flow of creation goes on through all eternity and that the souls have always existed, though subsequently their names and form were developed: "The fact of the souls being without a beginning is observed, viz. to be stated in Scripture. . . ."<sup>21</sup> He then quotes the *śruti* and selects one passage in particular that makes his point about the eternal and pluralistic nature of souls: "Moreover, the text, 'Now all this was then undeveloped. It became developed by form and name' [*Bri. Up. I. 4. 7*] states merely that the names and forms of the souls themselves existed from the beginning."<sup>22</sup> Of course, none of this could be said by Śaṅkara, who, as we shall see, has problems precisely because he cannot speak of eternal and plural souls. Rāmānuja concludes: "As Brahman thus differs in nature from everything else, possesses all powers, has no other motive than sport, and arranges the diversity of the creation in accordance with the different Karman of the individual souls, Brahman alone can be the universal cause."<sup>23</sup>

In summary, Rāmānuja can hold that God and individual souls are distinct and have existed from eternity. As we have said, with his strict Advaita position Śaṅkara cannot maintain such an apparent pluralism, however hedged about and qualified Rāmānuja might subsequently decide to make it. But this internal disagreement does not alter the fact that the argument for the beginninglessness of the world seems to take care of the objections to the rebirth

<sup>19</sup> *Rk*, p. 364.

<sup>20</sup> *S*, p. 341.

<sup>21</sup> *Rj*, p. 479.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.

solution mentioned above in 4. The whole matter is developed further in the last *sūtra* we shall discuss.

II. 1. 36 The beginninglessness of *samsāra* is proved by reason, and found in Scripture.

Rāmānuja advances no arguments in his commentary at this point; he very briefly summarizes what he has more or less said already. On the other hand, in his commentary Śaṅkara devotes nearly six times the space that Rāmānuja does to expanding on a point he had previously raised in *B.S.* II. 1. 35. In that earlier *sūtra bhāṣya*, Śaṅkara had said that we would be involved in a circularity if we assumed that there was a beginning with no prior human actions, and that the Lord was guided in his dispensings of good and evil to living beings by their prior actions (the argument he attacks also is self-contradictory), for then work depends on diversity of life conditions, and the latter in turn would depend on work.

In the *bhāṣya* to *sūtra* 36, Śaṅkara delivers what I take to be five separate arguments to establish the beginninglessness of *samsāra*, or at least five arguments can be wrung without violence from the following statement (I mark the arguments with Arabic numerals):

That transmigratory existence is beginningless is reasonably sustainable. [1] If it were to have a beginning, then it having come into existence capriciously without any cause, [2] the predicament of persons who have attained Final Release being again involved in transmigratory existence, would take place, [3] as also the predicament of 'fruit' arising without any action having taken place, because (under such supposition) there would be no cause for the disparity between pleasure and misery (to come into existence). [4] . . . Without action, a physical body would not result, nor would action result in the absence of a physical body, and hence it would all result in the fault of mutual interdependence. If on the other hand, transmigratory existence is understood to be beginningless, then it would all be reasonably sustainable. . . . [5] That, transmigratory existence is beginningless, is understood both from the Scriptures and Smritis.<sup>24</sup>

Let me take these arguments in order and look closely at them. The general form of all of them is essentially *reductio*. Thus, accepting a beginning of the world, you have to accept: (1) capricious or chance creation; (2) released persons becoming unreleased; (3) effects arising without any causes; (4) physical-body-effects arising without action-causes in particular, and action-effects arising in the absence of physical-body-causes in particular; and (5) the wrongness of *śruti* and *smṛti*. But all of (1) to (5) are, Śaṅkara says, patently absurd, so our assumption must be wrong; hence *samsāra* has no beginning. But does all of this really follow? Let us suppose a beginning:

<sup>24</sup> *S.*, p. 342.

1. Why must we admit to "capriciousness" (Apte introduces the word in his translation; I do not find it or any synonym for it in Śaṅkara's text) and why must it be causeless? If it happens by chance, then chance causes it. What is wrong with chance causes? But why resort to such subterfuge? God could perfectly well cause the world. By an act of His super will He could bring it into being *ex nihilo*, or out of His own superabundant Self. It is true that this gets us into the problem of evil, but it certainly does not lead to the absurdity to which Śaṅkara claims it must lead if we accept the beginning-hypothesis. Our possibilities are not limited; to think so is to commit the myopic fallacy. There is a cause, according to our counterargument, and it can be chance or God; hence Śaṅkara's narrowed possibility does not apply.

2. There is nothing to guarantee that liberated souls must perforce return to *samsāra*. It is true that nothing guarantees that they will not on the information we have been given here. But if we do have a cause, God, then He could guarantee that liberated souls do not return. The assumption that they must or will is again a form of the myopic fallacy. The belief that they might could be equally well entertained under either a beginning-hypothesis or a beginningless-hypothesis. If chance rules the universe they might return, but with chance ruling could one even speak of liberated souls? There might be none at all. If God rules, they need not return, unless God Himself is capricious, and in that case we are back to chance once again.

3. The third argument, of course, is predicated on the assumption that that first beginning moment of *samsāra* must be an effect of some action. But we have seen that it could be the effect of God's action. To assume as Śaṅkara does that human first moments *must* be the effect of previous human moments is absurd and without support. When the first gibbering primate came out of the trees and silently walked erect, he was then surely the *first* silent and erect nonarboreal primate: the first human being. Śaṅkara's whole difficulty here, of course, is that he holds strenuously to a *satkāryavāda* theory of causation and a *pariṇāma* theory of cosmogony. These assumptions can be attacked, and presenting a countermodel, for example, with the gibbering primate above, would be one such approach. This counterargument to Śaṅkara will be expanded on in 4.

4. Granted that physical bodies and action are dependent in one direction, that is, a situation in which action causes physical bodies, there is nothing to necessitate mutual interdependence. To assume it, as Śaṅkara does, is to beg the whole question loudly and mightily. For we can argue that physical bodies do not cause action, the first action at least, for that first action could be caused by God in an act of creation *ex nihilo*, let us say, and surely God is not a physical body. Thus there is no reason to fall into the net that Śaṅkara has spread before us; we simply question his presuppositions. With respect to 3 and 4, I think it is obvious that they both rest on the same

causal assumptions such that if either 3 or 4 can be successfully attacked—and I am not saying we have done that—then 4 and 3, respectively, must necessarily fall as well.

5. *Śruti* and *smṛti* are notorious for being many things to many people. It is curious that although Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja both quote scriptural sources to support their proofs for 36, neither quotes the same passages. Rāmānuja quotes selections to back up his Viśiṣṭādvaita, while Śaṅkara, of course, carefully steers away from such verses. Thus quoting scripture in the end can prove nothing when passages can be selected to support such diverse views on the soul as those of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja.<sup>25</sup> This ends our discussion of the *sūtras*.

#### CONCLUSION

Whatever their basic differences, Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja are agreed on the basic issues regarding the problem of evil. These are essentially three:

1. They both agree that *līlā* absolves God from blame for the evils and sufferings in creation. Who after all can blame a child for acts done in joy and playful exuberance? But the problems resulting from our analysis of play, its putative purposelessness, and its *prima facie* innocence, were too enormous to permit the *līlā* solution to stand as a solution to the problem of evil.

2. The rebirth solution can account for all the evil, human, superhuman, and subhuman, around us today (cf. the cruelty argument and the discrimination argument). Final cosmic dissolutions can be accounted for (the destruction argument) by a form of the rebirth solution that stresses the downright unregenerate state of the creation immediately preceding and even during that dissolution. Thus the rebirth solution manages to meet these three arguments that promised peril for the Lord and that would make the problem of evil genuinely insoluble.

But the price may be high. We are involved once again with problems about the goodness and powerfulness of God who saw what was coming (if He could) but permitted it to happen anyway. If this is justice, perhaps we have need of less of it. Thus while the problem of extraordinary or gratuitous evil can be explained by a reference to previous *karman*, this cannot, the ordinary man might feel, justify the evil. The Vedāntist may counter with the assertion that there really is no extraordinary (unearned or chance) evil, but all is deserved and all is paid back by the law of *karman*. Most persons might object on two grounds:

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *S*, p. 342, and *Rj*, p. 479. Radhakrishnan, the great synthesizer, quotes the scriptural selections from both philosophers (*Rk*, p. 364).



a. The doctrine is seemingly callous, for it attempts not only to *explain* evil by the rebirth solution but also to *justify* that evil at the same time by calling it “right” or “deserved.” One is reminded of early Puritan attitudes to poverty and the poor—the poor you always have with you and their suffering is the will of God. Whether the will of God or the will of *karman*, the position might seem somewhat callous to the ordinary man.

b. The doctrine may lead to quietism and a certain passiveness of spirit that many would find personally and socially immoral. Thus if people suffer because of their previous bad deeds, then if the law of *karman* is seen as the universal arbiter, and if it is just and right in what it brings about, any attempt to assuage the sufferings of others consequently will be seen as an abridgment of their need, their right, to suffering and cleansing. Hence the right thing to do would be to wink at the human plight, and go about one’s own merry old selfish moral business. The position might seem to the ordinary man as inevitably leading to such a quietistic conclusion. Further, not only are there these problems with man and the world resulting from accepting the rebirth solution, but we have seen that there are theological problems quite outside the rebirth solution that seemingly place the Divine in the touchy position of having perfection while permitting evil He could prevent, or preventing an evil creation from having so much extraordinary evil. One can well ask, Granted that evil necessarily must come, why is there so much? Why is it so hideous? Why is it so seemingly senseless? Again, of course, the Vedāntist has a ready reply to all such challenges.

3. Both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja agree, furthermore, that God cannot be responsible for the beginning of creation for the simple reason that *samsāra* has no beginning. This raises at least one question now, not concerning rebirth and *karman* that He cannot control as in 2 above, but concerning a beginningless creation He could not start. The whole notion of beginninglessness needs analysis here, and I want to mention two minor problems connected with it:

a. The Vedāntists speak about a final destruction, or if not a *final* ultimate dissolution, then a series of penultimate ones. How, it might be asked, can you have a dissolution and then a creation without involving yourself in a beginning? If the *Kali Yuga* will end in violence and suffering because all deserve it, then was the Golden Age which preceded it not a time of “beginning” in some sense of that word? And if a beginning in some sense of that word, then how about God and evil in some sense of those words? And if a beginning and God and evil in some sense of those words, then why is there not a problem of evil in some sense of those words?

b. If the Vedas mention, as they do in their various cosmogonic moods (e.g., *R.V.* X. 129; 190ff), origins of the universe, then are these rather straightforward metaphysical myths to be subjected to procrustean therapy

just to save Vedāntists from a nasty puzzle? Thus if the mythology of creation does indeed say that there was a beginning, in some sense of that word, in non-Being, or *puruṣa*, or in an act of Indra or Brahmā, and if you are inclined to take your *śruti* seriously, then is it not the better part of philosophic valor to admit to beginnings and face the philosophic music, rather than to hedge about what “beginning” might mean so that, stretching it a bit, one can come to face oddities like the problem of evil? Again, the ordinary man might be affronted by this Vedāntic ploy in what otherwise must be seen as a series of brilliant theodical moves to solve the problem of evil in *B.S.* II. 1. 32-36.