

Examrace

Competitive Exams: Properties of the Self

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The debate on the existence of the self can not be separated from a description of the nature of the self. The Scriptures mention three properties of the self. The self is eternal, non-material and is identical with Brahman: The ultimate reality. The eternality of the self follows according to Sankara from the essential irrefutability of its nature. Sankara is claiming here that since the self is not an effect, it has no beginning or end and is therefore eternal. The Buddhist would dispute this argument because they believe that anything that is uncaused, does not exist.

Sankara argues for the immateriality of the self by stating that the existence of an eternal, immaterial self, distinct from the body is a necessary presupposition for the achievement of liberation. The Scriptures would otherwise make no sense, which is a unacceptable conclusion for the Vedantins. This argument is of course not acceptable to the heterodox schools because they do not accept the Scriptures as a source of valid knowledge.

The Naiyayika uses an argument from language to ascertain that the self is distinct from the body. The Nyaya argument from language encompasses that since the word I is used in the Vedas and ordinary talk and since everything in the Vedas is true, the word I must refer to an existing entity. They hold that the word I must refer to a non-physical entity because: 'If the notion I referred to the body, then just as another man's body being as perceptible as our own body ... The other man's body would also be capable of being spoken of as I'

The persistence of the self is induced by the Naiyayika through the argument from memory. We have desires for objects that have been experienced in the past as being pleasant. One cannot desire a thing one does not remember and one can not remember someone else's experiences. They argue that there must therefore be a continuously existing self who had the experience in the past and who is desiring it in the present.

The materialists only accept the four elements air, water, fire and earth as the basic building blocks of reality and ultimate facts of the universe. The body is to the Carvaka a unique combination of these elements and the self emerges from these elements. They thus account for the higher principle of mind by the lower one of matter. The views of the Carvaka have been fervently opposed by the other schools of thought (darsana) in classical Indian philosophy. It is clear from the materials at our disposal that Carvaka philosophy was viewed with far greater disrespect than any other darsana. Phil Hari Singh argues that there appears to be an underlying hostility towards the Carvaka that is not fully borne out by the analysis of their doctrines.

To the Buddhists a person is not a single substance existing continuously through time, but a series of physical and mental states also called 'person states' The Buddhist term for an individual, a term which is intended to suggest the difference between the Buddhist view and other theories, is santana, which means stream.

Each person state consists of various psychological and physiological factors, the skandhas. These skandhas are not persistent in time but last only for one infinitesimal short period. The person states fleet away and give rise to new person states in an endless cycle of cause and effect. Because every single person state only exist for an infinitesimal short period of time, there can not be a persistent self. The instantaneous succession of skandhas gives the impression of continuity, like the succession of twenty four still images per second gives the illusion of a moving image.

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