

The value of nature in Indian (Hindu) traditions

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Abstract: Many authors claim that certain Indian (Hindu) texts and traditions deny that nature has intrinsic value. If nature has value at all, it has value only as a means to *mokṣa* (liberation). This view is implausible as an interpretation of any Indian tradition that accepts the doctrines of *ahiṃsā* (non-harm) and *karma*. The proponent must explain the connection between *ahiṃsā* and merit by citing the connection between *ahiṃsā* and *mokṣa*: *ahiṃsā* is valuable, and therefore produces merit, because *ahiṃsā* is instrumentally valuable as a means to *mokṣa*. *Ahiṃsā* is a means to *mokṣa*, however, because it produces merit. Hence the explanation is circular. Additionally, this view entails that morality is strictly arbitrary – it might just as well be that *hiṃsā* (harm) produces merit, and *ahiṃsā* produces demerit. An alternative interpretation that avoids these problems states that the value of *ahiṃsā* derives from the intrinsic value of the unharmed entities.

Introduction

In this paper I consider a widely accepted interpretation of the value of nature in Indian (Hindu) texts and traditions. The interpretation states that certain Indian texts and traditions deny that nature has intrinsic value. If nature has value at all, it has only instrumental value, as a means to *mokṣa* (liberation).

I argue that this view – which I call the ‘instrumentalist interpretation’ – is implausible as an interpretation of any Indian tradition that accepts the doctrines of *ahiṃsā* (non-harm) and *karma*. The proponent of this view must explain the connection between *ahiṃsā* and merit by citing the connection between *ahiṃsā* and *mokṣa*. He must say that *ahiṃsā* is valuable, and therefore produces merit, because *ahiṃsā* is instrumentally valuable as a means to *mokṣa*. *Ahiṃsā* is a means to *mokṣa*, however, because it produces merit. Hence, the explanation is circular. Additionally, the instrumentalist interpretation entails that morality is strictly arbitrary – it might just as well be that *hiṃsā* (harm) produces merit, and *ahiṃsā* produces demerit. Hence the instrumentalist interpretation is implausible.

In order to avoid this consequence, something other than *mokṣa* must have intrinsic value. One alternative is that the value of *ahiṃsā* derives from the intrinsic value of the unharmed entities. This view explains the connection between *ahiṃsā*, merit, and *mokṣa* straightforwardly. Since certain entities are intrinsically valuable, non-harm towards them is (at least prima facie) meritorious. Since non-harm towards these entities is meritorious, the agent accrues merit (with some qualifications). And since the agent accrues merit, she moves closer to *mokṣa* (with some qualifications). I argue that this interpretation is more plausible than another alternative, according to which the value of nature derives from its this-worldly utility for humans.

The basic instrumentalist interpretation

It makes sense to expect that there will be a tight connection between a tradition's assessment of the value of nature, on the one hand, and a tradition's rules governing the treatment of nature (that is, natural entities), on the other. Indeed, we should be able to infer the most basic moral guidelines that govern the treatment of nature from a tradition's assessment of its value and vice versa.

Hence, it might be thought that an inference can be drawn from certain Indian traditions' explicit claims about the proper treatment of nature to a claim about the value of nature. Specifically, one might argue that the moral principle of *ahiṃsā* (non-harm) entails that nature has intrinsic value – that its value is not derived exclusively from the value of further ends to which it is a means.

The case for the intrinsic value of nature is not this simple, however. Basant K. Lal, for example, explains the virtue of *ahiṃsā* within the Hindu traditions in the following way. 'The Hindu recommendation to cultivate a particular kind of attitude [namely, *ahiṃsā*] toward animals is based *not* on considerations about the *animal* as such but on considerations about how the development of this attitude is part of the purificatory steps that bring men to the path of *mokṣa* [sic]' (Lal (1986), 200, italics in original). According to Lal, Hindu traditions do not discourage harm to animals because animals are intrinsically valuable. They discourage harm to animals because the avoidance of harm to animals is a means to the intrinsically valuable end of *mokṣa* (liberation). Both the attitude of *ahiṃsā*, then, and animals themselves, are only instrumentally valuable, as a means to the further end of *mokṣa*. Presumably Lal would also deny that other natural entities, like plants, have intrinsic value.

Lance E. Nelson defends a similar interpretation of Advaita and the *Bhagavadgītā* with regard to nature more generally. In the case of Advaita, Nelson concludes that 'all that is other than the Ātman [true self], including nature, is without [intrinsic] value' (Nelson (1998), 66). Similarly, he argues that according to the *Bhagavadgītā*, '[i]t is the self (*ātman*) that is important, not nature' (Nelson

(2000), 140). If nature has any value at all, it is merely instrumental, as a means to attaining or realizing the *ātman*. Since the seeker attains or realizes the *ātman* only if she attains or realizes *mokṣa*, Lal's and Nelson's views are roughly the same: only *mokṣa* has intrinsic value; if nature has value at all, it has instrumental value as a means to *mokṣa*.

Nelson offers two distinct arguments for his conclusion. The first argument might be called the 'argument from illusion'. Everything other than the *ātman* is a product of *māyā* (a deluding force), and hence illusory. Anything that is illusory is devoid of intrinsic value. Hence everything other than the *ātman* is devoid of intrinsic value. Since nature is other than the *ātman*, nature is devoid of intrinsic value.

The second argument might be called the 'argument from pain'. It states that the world of *saṃsāra* (rebirth) and everything in it is inherently painful and unsatisfactory. If the world of *saṃsāra* and everything in it is inherently painful and unsatisfactory, then it has only negative value. If *saṃsāra* and everything in it has only negative value, then it lacks positive intrinsic value.

In his paper on Advaita and the environment, Nelson says the following,

Śaṅkara and his disciples see the universe of birth and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) as a 'terrible ocean' infested with sea-monsters. In it we are drowning, and from it we need rescue ... Individual selves trapped in *saṃsāra* go from birth to birth without attaining peace. They are like worms, caught in a river, being swept along from one whirlpool to another ... The sole purpose of the Advaitic guru is to overcome the monster of ignorance, together with its manifestation, the world ... What should our attitude to participation in life be? Śaṅkara answers that we should regard *saṃsāra* as a terrible (*ghora*) and vast ocean, existence in which should be feared, even despised. (Nelson (1998), 67)

Since the world of *saṃsāra* is based on ignorance (the argument from illusion), and since *saṃsāra* is horrific (the argument from pain), one should hate it, fear it, and do all one can to escape it. Indeed, the ascetic 'must cultivate positive disgust for [the body] and all other phenomena' (Nelson (1998), 70). If the world is something from which we should recoil, then presumably it lacks intrinsic value.

Nelson offers similar arguments in the context of the *Bhagavadgītā*. He claims that a number of *Gītā* verses state that the natural world is an illusion. *Gītā* 2.16, for example, identifies the three *guṇas* (fundamental physical elements), which together constitute the entire material world, with *māyā* (argument from illusion) (Nelson (2000), 137). He points out that *Gītā* 8.15 characterizes the world of *prakṛti* (that is, the material world) as an 'abode of pain'. Nelson mentions *Gītā* 14.5 and 14.20, which claim that escape from the material world is 'an urgent desideratum' (argument from pain) (*Ibid.*).

J. Baird Callicott (Callicott (1994), 48), Arvind Sharma (Sharma (1998), 51), Rita DasGupta Sherma (Sherma (1998), 95), Patricia Y. Mumme (Mumme (1998), 135), and others, endorse this interpretation as well. Sherma, for example, says that, 'in

India as elsewhere, nature, the human body and its functions, worldly life, and women were associated and enmeshed in a net of devaluation' (Sherma (1998), 95). Callicott says,

Looked at from the Hindu perspective ... the empirical world is both unimportant, because it is not ultimately real [argument from illusion], and contemptible, because it seduces the soul into crediting appearances, pursuing false ends, and thus earning bad *karma* [argument from pain]. It distracts the soul from seeking its own true nature [*ātman*] and thereby attaining liberation [*mokṣa*]. (Callicott (1994), 48)

Put simply, this kind of view makes two claims:

- (1) Only the attainment or realization of *mokṣa* is intrinsically valuable, and,
- (2) Nature is instrumentally valuable only as a means to *mokṣa*.

In what follows, I will refer to this as the 'instrumentalist interpretation' of the value of nature.

The instrumentalist interpretation can be diagrammed preliminarily in the following way:

ahiṃsā → *mokṣa*

The arrow in the diagram represents a causal relation, but a second arrow might just as well be drawn in the reverse direction to indicate the direction in which value flows on this view. The value of *ahiṃsā* – like the value of everything on the instrumentalist interpretation – is derived from the value of *mokṣa*.

In contrast, *hiṃsā* (harm) is counter-productive to the attainment or realization of *mokṣa*, and the disvalue of *hiṃsā*, on this view, derives entirely from the disvalue of the postponement of the agent's *mokṣa*. So the preliminary diagram can be expanded to read:

ahiṃsā → *mokṣa*
hiṃsā → postponement of *mokṣa*

While some authors are careful to attribute this view to individual texts and traditions, others – like Lal, Callicott, and William F. Goodwin (see below) – attribute it to Hinduism more broadly.

The attribution of this view to various Indian traditions has a rich history. One of the main topics at the Second East–West Philosophers' Conference in 1949 rehearsed the ancient question of whether *dharma* is valuable solely as a means to *mokṣa* (Moore (1951)). The consensus seems to have been that 'Hindu moral philosophy ... offers a theory of "ultimate good" which allegedly excludes all natural objects and experiences from the *Summum Bonum*; and postulates a being or an experience [namely *mokṣa*] which is characterized as alone of intrinsic worth' (Goodwin (1955), 325).

Goodwin reviews a number of the papers from the conference and accepts the argument for this view as ‘unqualifiedly sound’ (Goodwin (1955), 321). Most of these authors were concerned with ethics broadly construed, rather than with environmental ethics *per se*, but their conclusions about the implications of Indian metaphysics are the same – the natural world is valuable only as a means to *mokṣa*.

Of course the debate over the status of *dharma* in relation to *mokṣa* has its earliest origin in the disagreement between the Mīmāṃsikas and Vedāntins over whether the *karma kāṇḍa* (action portion) or *jñāna kāṇḍa* (knowledge portion) of the Veda is authoritative – whether the ultimate purpose of the Veda is to enjoin people to ritual actions as a means of maintaining the order of the world and improving their circumstances, or to teach people the ultimate nature of reality and facilitate liberation via knowledge. For now, I want to leave open the question of whether the instrumentalist interpretation is an accurate interpretation of Advaita, the *Bhagavadgītā*, or any other Indian text or tradition. I will finally argue that it is not. What is certain, however, is that this position has been attributed to various Indian texts and traditions – especially the *Gītā* and Advaita – throughout history.

The instrumentalist interpretation requires further clarification. Within many Indian texts and traditions, morally praiseworthy and blameworthy actions are typically accompanied by merit and demerit, respectively. Instances of this claim are so widespread that they hardly need mention. *Manusmṛti* 5.52–53, for example, reads:

No one else is a producer of demerit as much as the person who, outside of [acts of] worship to ancestors or gods, desires to increase his own meat by means of the meat of another. The one who performs the horse sacrifice every single year for 100 years and the one who will not eat meat are equal, the fruit [results] of the merit [meritorious actions] of these two is equal. (Jhā (1999), 443)

The horse sacrifice is an elaborate, expensive ritual that only the most powerful king can successfully perform. To perform it every year for 100 years is a nearly impossible task. Yet the merit (fruit) that accrues from its accomplishment is no greater than that which results from simple vegetarianism. In other words,

ahimsā → merit

For the person who eats meat indiscriminately, great demerit accrues. A later verse in the *Manusmṛti* (5.55) plays on a pun with the word *māṃsa* (meat). ‘[He] whose meat (*māṃsa*) I eat in this world, he (*sa*) eats me (*mām*) in the next world. This, the wise say, is the derivation of the word *māṃsa*’ (Jhā (1999), 444). The thought is that by eating meat, an individual incurs demerit that results in being eaten, or some equivalent pain, in another birth. Hence the view is that

hiṃsā → demerit

The *Mahābhārata* makes identical claims. Mirroring word for word the first *pāda* of *Manusmṛti* 5.52, *Mahābhārata* 13.116.14 says, ‘the person who desires to increase his own meat by means of the meat of another ... he is ruined’ (Dandekar (1966), 627). (The *pāda* is repeated at 13.116.34 (Dandekar (1966), 629).) Another series of verses (13.117.32–34) read:

He, O King, who will not eat any meat for his entire life, he will attain a large place in heaven. In this [I have] no doubt. Those who eat the living flesh of beings, they are also eaten by those living beings. Of this, I have no doubt. Since he (*sa*) eats me (*mām*), therefore I will eat him as well. Let you know, O Bhārata, this (is) the derivation of the word *māmsa*. (Dandekar (1966), 638)

These passages make clear that both *ahiṃsā* and *hiṃsā* have consequences in the form of merit and demerit, respectively. The punishment for harm is subjection to (at least) equivalent harm. One reward for non-harm is a lavish place in heaven.

Furthermore, it is a platitude within the Indian traditions that demerit is counter-productive to the attainment or realization of *mokṣa*. Hence,

hiṃsā → demerit → postponement of
mokṣa

So presumably part of what the proponents of the instrumentalist interpretation mean when they say that *ahiṃsā* is a means to *mokṣa* is that *ahiṃsā* is a means to avoiding the demerit that both arises as a result of *hiṃsā* and postpones *mokṣa*. Roy W. Perrett takes Lal to be making this point when he says,

... [according to Lal,] [f]rom an Indian point of view the reason one should avoid meat-eating [and harm to animals more generally] is not that it is immoral to eat meat, but that it is imprudent to do so, since it leads to one’s further entanglement in the cycle of rebirth and suffering. (Perrett (1993), 92)

Harm to animals produces demerit, which prolongs *saṃsāra*, and hence postpones that which one attains when one escapes *saṃsāra* – namely *mokṣa*. Again, the arrows in the diagram represent causal relations, and a second set of arrows in the reverse direction might indicate the direction in which disvalue flows. It is because the postponement of *mokṣa* is of intrinsic disvalue that demerit has instrumental disvalue, and *hiṃsā* has instrumental disvalue because it produces demerit. At the very least, *ahiṃsā* is a means to avoiding these consequences of *hiṃsā*, and its value is at least partly explained by this.

The benefits of *ahiṃsā* are not entirely negative, however. It is also a platitude within the Indian traditions that certain forms of merit are a condition of the eventual attainment or realization of *mokṣa* (see just below for some important qualifications). Consider a straightforward argument for this claim: in order to be born a human being, one must have sufficient merit. In order to attain *mokṣa*, one

must be born a human being. Hence in order to attain *mokṣa*, one must accrue sufficient merit. Hence *ahiṃsā* is a means to *mokṣa* at least in part because it is a means to merit.

ahiṃsā → merit → *mokṣa*

If this is right, then *ahiṃsā* is instrumentally valuable because it is a means to certain merit, which, in turn, is instrumentally valuable because it is a means to *mokṣa*. Value flows from *mokṣa*, to merit, to *ahiṃsā*.

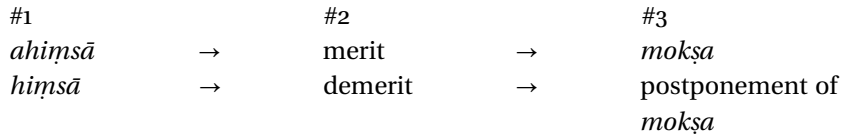
This seems to be what Nelson has in mind when he says, ‘*ahiṃsā*, as a value, is articulated for the most part out of concern for the private karmic well-being of the actor’ (Nelson (2000), 142). If the value of *ahiṃsā*, like the value of everything else, ultimately derives exclusively from the value of *mokṣa* (as the instrumentalist interpretation states), then *ahiṃsā* is valuable as a means to the ‘karmic well-being of the actor’ only if the karmic well-being of the actor is a means to *mokṣa*. Hence on the instrumentalist interpretation, *ahiṃsā* is instrumentally valuable because it is a means to merit, which, in turn, is instrumentally valuable because it is a means to *mokṣa*.

Again, for now I want to leave aside the question of whether this is an accurate interpretation of Advaita, the *Gītā*, and so on. There are a number of objections that might be raised, however, that are avoided with some simple qualifications. First, it is important to keep in mind that this account does not entail that merit is a *sufficient* condition of *mokṣa*. Śāṅkara, of course, claims that *mokṣa* is the result of knowledge, not action and its merits, and even Rāmānuja does not think that action is sufficient to attain liberation. Nonetheless, both accept that action and its consequences play some role in attaining *mokṣa* – even if only a preliminary, preparatory, or purificatory role as a means to some more immediate means to *mokṣa*, like knowledge (as in the case of Śāṅkara).

Nor does this second claim mean that all merit produces *mokṣa*. It is widely accepted that at some point along one’s path to liberation, all karmic consequences become counter-productive, and must be avoided. So it is not the case that merit *invariably* moves one incrementally towards *mokṣa*. The point here, however, is simply that some merit is needed in order to attain *mokṣa*, and that the production of the merit that is needed in order to attain *mokṣa* is the way in which *ahiṃsā* is a means to *mokṣa*. And even for the agent for whom all merit is counter-productive to the attainment of *mokṣa*, *ahiṃsā* is still a means to *mokṣa* because it precludes the demerit that would both result from *hiṃsā* and postpone the agent’s attainment or realization of *mokṣa*.

So according to the proponents of the instrumentalist interpretation, it is the fact that *ahiṃsā* produces merit (and avoids the production of demerit), and the fact that merit is a condition of *mokṣa*, that makes *ahiṃsā* valuable in the first place. Additionally, it is the fact that *hiṃsā* produces demerit, and the fact that demerit postpones *mokṣa*, that makes *hiṃsā* of disvalue in

the first place. The full diagram of the instrumentalist interpretation therefore reads:

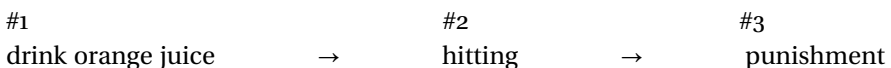


An objection to the instrumentalist interpretation

There is a fundamental problem with this view of the value of nature in Indian traditions. The latter connection in the diagram – the connection between merit and *mokṣa*, #2 and #3 – is unproblematic (with the qualifications mentioned above). What is in need of explanation is the former connection – the connection between *ahiṃsā* and merit, #1 and #2. If *ahiṃsā* is not intrinsically valuable, because nature itself is not intrinsically valuable, why does *ahiṃsā* towards nature produce merit in the first place? The proponent of the instrumentalist interpretation seems to want to explain the connection between *ahiṃsā* and merit, #1 and #2, by citing the connection between *ahiṃsā* and *mokṣa*, #1 and #3. *Ahiṃsā* leads to *mokṣa*, however, only because (and if) it produces merit in the first place. That is, #1 leads to #3 because #1 produces #2 first. So it cannot be that #1 leads to #2 because #1 produces #3. It cannot be that *ahiṃsā* leads to merit because *ahiṃsā* leads to *mokṣa*, if *ahiṃsā* leads to *mokṣa* because it leads to *merit*.

There are two different ways to characterize this objection. The first is to say that the instrumentalist interpretation is circular. The proponent of the instrumentalist interpretation answers the question, ‘Why does *ahiṃsā*, #1, produce merit, #2?’ by saying, ‘because *ahiṃsā*, #1, leads to *mokṣa*, #3’. He then answers the question ‘Why does *ahiṃsā*, #1, lead to *mokṣa*, #3?’, by saying, ‘because *ahiṃsā*, #1, produces merit, #2’. This leads full circle, obviously, to the original question: ‘Why does *ahiṃsā*, #1, produce merit, #2?’

The second way to characterize the objection is to say that the connection between *ahiṃsā* and *mokṣa* is simply irrelevant when cited in explanation of the connection between *ahiṃsā* and merit. Consider an analogy. Suppose a boy hits his younger sister any time she drinks orange juice. When he hits his sister, his parents inevitably punish him. Hence,



Now suppose that when his sister asks him, ‘Why do you hit me when I drink orange juice?’ – that is, why does #1 produce #2 – the boy answers, ‘Because when you drink orange juice, I get punished’ – that is, because #1 produces #3. It should be clear that this is no explanation at all, since the boy will be punished for hitting

his sister no matter what his reason for doing so – #3 will arise from #2 inevitably. Absent some additional explanation, then, there is little reason to think that the boy's policy of hitting his sister when she drinks orange juice is anything but perfectly arbitrary. That is, there is no reason to think that the connection between #1 and #2 is not perfectly arbitrary.

The same conclusion ought to be drawn, however, from the instrumentalist interpretation. In both cases, the connection between #2 and #3 is unproblematic. In both cases, the connection between #1 and #2 is in need of explanation. And in both cases, the connection between #1 and #2 is explained in terms of the connection between #1 and #3. Just as this kind of explanation implies that the connection between the sister drinking orange juice and the brother hitting her is perfectly arbitrary, likewise this kind of explanation implies that the connection between *ahimsā* and merit (and *himsā* and demerit) is perfectly arbitrary. If this is right, then it might just as well have been that *ahimsā* produced demerit, and that *himsā* produced merit, just as the boy might just as well have the policy of hitting his sister for not drinking orange juice, or for drinking milk.

That this consequence follows from the instrumentalist interpretation constitutes a reason to reject it. The consequence parallels one of the horns in the dilemma that Socrates poses to Euthyphro. Euthyphro defines the pious as that which is loved by the gods. Socrates points out that if the love of the gods determines what is pious, then it might have been that vices were virtues and vice versa. Furthermore, had the gods loved murder, lying, and adultery, rather than their opposites, there would be no grounds on which to criticize their preferences, since the definition of piety states that the love of the gods and only the love of the gods determines what is pious. The gods' decisions about what to love, then, are and must be perfectly whimsical, much like an ordinary person's decision about which sock to put on first, and their decision is no more criticizable than a decision of this sort. The problem with this consequence is that morality seems more sensible and stable than either story allows. Just as Socrates takes this consequence to be a reason to reject Euthyphro's definition of piety, likewise we should take this consequence to be a reason to reject the instrumentalist interpretation – regardless of the Indian tradition being interpreted.

Some of the mid-twentieth-century scholars whom I mentioned above make this point. They argue that if the instrumentalist interpretation is correct, then there is no justification for the distinction between right and wrong, and morality is perfectly arbitrary. Since these scholars accept the instrumentalist interpretation, they conclude that morality within Indian traditions is indeed 'intellectually rootless' (Goodwin (1955), 323). Bhāskara advances the same objection against Śaṅkara. 'The distinction of good and evil ... fits only with our view' (Ingalls (1957), 34).

The same argument weighs against two additional replies. First, the proponent of the instrumentalist interpretation might attempt to avoid the charge of circularity by explaining the connection between *ahiṃsā* and merit in terms of some kind of divine-command theory, according to which *ahiṃsā* is meritorious because God and/or scripture prescribes it. If this is right, however, then the moral prescription is perfectly arbitrary. It might have been that *ahiṃsā* produced demerit, and *hiṃsā* produced merit. This consequence is implausible.

Second, the proponent might reply that human beings happen to be such that harm to animals increases their delusion, which, in turn, precludes or postpones their attainment of *mokṣa*. Since this is a contingent fact, however, it might have been otherwise. So it might have been that *ahiṃsā* produced demerit, and *hiṃsā* produced merit. The alternative that I favour avoids this consequence.¹

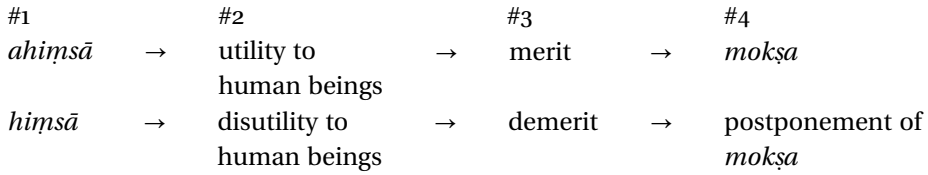
The more charitable alternative, however, is that the instrumentalist interpretation cannot be correct. If the instrumentalist interpretation entails that morality is arbitrary, and hence that it might just as well have been that *hiṃsā* lead to *mokṣa* and that *ahiṃsā* postponed it, then the instrumentalist interpretation must be false. It cannot be that the *Gītā*, Advaita, or any other Indian text or tradition that accepts the doctrines of *ahiṃsā* (non-harm) and *karma* insists that nothing other than *mokṣa* is intrinsically valuable. Something other than *mokṣa* must be intrinsically valuable as well.

An alternative view

Thus far, I have argued that in order to explain the connections between *ahiṃsā*, merit, and *mokṣa*, something other than *mokṣa* must be intrinsically valuable. There are at least two additional interpretations. The first is what might be called the ‘revised instrumentalist interpretation’. This view is similar to the instrumentalist interpretation in that it maintains both that (non-human) nature is devoid of intrinsic value, and that *mokṣa* is intrinsically valuable. It differs from the instrumentalist interpretation, however, in that it allows that something besides *mokṣa* has intrinsic value. The version of the revised instrumentalist interpretation that might seem the most plausible attributes intrinsic value to human beings, in addition to *mokṣa*, but to nothing else. (I put aside the fact that human beings too are part of nature.) This is the kind of position that Mary McGee, for example, attributes to the *Arthasāstra* (McGee (2000)).

The revised instrumentalist interpretation avoids the objections of circularity and arbitrariness that I outline above. The connection between *ahiṃsā* and merit, #1 and #2, is explained without reference to the connection between *ahiṃsā* and *mokṣa*, #1 and #3. Instead, *ahiṃsā* produces merit because animals are

instrumentally valuable to human beings, and human beings are intrinsically valuable. The relations might be diagrammed in the following way:



Ahiṃsā actions are instrumentally valuable because they preserve nature. Nature, in turn, is instrumentally valuable because it is useful to human beings in the form of timber, food, and so on. Since non-harm to nature benefits human beings, and since human beings are intrinsically valuable, non-harm to nature produces merit, which in turn produces *mokṣa* (with appropriate qualifications). Likewise, since *hiṃsā* actions harm that which is instrumentally valuable to humans, *hiṃsā* produces demerit. Demerit, in turn, postpones *mokṣa*.

The revised instrumentalist interpretation faces a number of problems, however. Consider, for example, how the revised instrumentalist interpretation must explain the quotations cited above from the *Manusmṛti* and *Mahābhārata*. Quotations from each text describe the extensive merit that accrues from avoiding meat-eating. If animals are only valuable as a means to the well-being of humans, however, as the revised instrumentalist interpretation states, then this should be puzzling, since using animals as a means to nourishment and palatal enjoyment is just to use them as a means to human welfare – namely the agent’s own welfare.

There are only two responses available to the proponent of the revised instrumentalist interpretation. First, it might be that meat-eating is discouraged because the eating of meat does not maximize the utility of animals for humans. Second, it might be that meat-eating is discouraged because one should be unselfish, and to eat meat is to take for oneself what might be used by others.

The first response is problematic because eating meat often does maximize the utility of animals. The second response is problematic for two reasons. First, if the only thing wrong with eating meat is that it is selfish, then there is nothing more wrong with meat-eating than with any other form of consumption. Yet meat-eating is singled out as an especially serious moral trespass. Second, the killing of animals for consumption by others is discouraged along with the killing of animals for oneself. (See, for example, *Manusmṛti* 5.51.) Hence it cannot be the selfishness of meat-eating that is problematic.

The second passage from each text describes horrendous torture as a result of meat-eating. If animals are valuable only as a means to human use, however, then this demerit that results from meat-eating, if it is deserved at all, is wildly excessive. Imagine, for example, that I kill a wild bird in an isolated place. I enjoy the hunt, and I enjoy the savour of the bird. It’s hard to see how I could, in killing

the bird, cause harm to human beings that would outweigh these benefits, let alone outweigh them enough to justify my being reborn as an animal to be eaten by the bird, and so on.

The revised instrumentalist interpretation faces other interpretive obstacles as well. Passages that explain the moral guidelines for the treatment of nature often focus on the consequences to the entity itself. *Manusmṛti* 5.49, for example, says, ‘having seen the origin of meat and the tying up and slaughter of living beings [that is the source of meat], a person turns away from the eating of all meat’ (Jhā (1999), 441). This suggests that the reason that meat-eating is morally wrong is self-evident to the morally sensitive person. It is not at all self-evident, however, that these animals instead might be used to greater benefit for human beings (or that harm to these animals will postpone one’s *mokṣa*!).

An alternative view – and the view that I endorse – is that plants, animals, and human beings are intrinsically valuable. Since they are intrinsically valuable, it is meritorious to treat them with benevolence. Since treating them with benevolence is meritorious, the agent accrues merit as a result. Merit, in turn, moves the agent incrementally closer to *mokṣa* (with the qualifications mentioned above). The interpretation is straightforward. It makes sense of the textual descriptions, and avoids the objections I have outlined above.²

I include plants here because *ahiṃsā* is typically described as the avoidance of harm to living beings (*bhūta, pranin*), rather than simply harm to animals. Additionally, plants are often considered sentient, and are included as stations within the cycle of rebirth. Consider *Manusmṛti* 1.48–1.50:

Various bushes and thickets, varieties of grasses, shoots, and creepers, shoot up from seeds or parts of others (1.48). Those [latter beings], enveloped by the *tamas* with many forms caused by [past] actions, are internally conscious, and fully endowed with [the capacity for] pleasure and pain (1.49). In this dreadful *saṃsāra*, constantly moving forever, these are declared [to be] the conditions of those undergoing rebirth, beginning with Brahmā and ending with these [basic plants]. (1.50)

In a seminal paper on *ahiṃsā*, Hans Peter Schmidt argues that ‘Manu’s rules against meat-eating are based on the *ahiṃsā*-doctrine, and this doctrine goes – in Manu’s view, too – beyond vegetarianism since at least plants are included in the category of animate beings’ (Schmidt (1968), 626).

Here again, certain objections can be avoided with some simple qualifications. This alternative view is consistent with the claim that *mokṣa* is more intrinsically valuable than anything else. A number of the proponents of the instrumentalist interpretation characterize the value of *mokṣa* as ‘ultimate’. The word ‘ultimate’ is importantly ambiguous, however. The view that I endorse admits that *mokṣa* is of ultimate value in the sense that it has the greatest intrinsic value. What the view that I endorse denies is that *mokṣa* is of ultimate value in the sense that it is the only thing that is valuable independent of further ends to which it is a means.

The environmentalist, however, is typically concerned with demonstrating that certain entities in nature have value of the latter sort. To say that the environmentalist succeeds only by proving that certain entities in nature are more valuable than anything else is to misunderstand the discussion.

Similarly, the view that I endorse is consistent with the claim that *mokṣa* is of ultimate value in the sense that it is the only end that any seeker will find fully satisfactory. Only with the attainment of *mokṣa* will the seeker seek no more. The view that I endorse denies, however, that *mokṣa* is the only thing that has any value for its own sake. Again, the environmentalist is not concerned to establish that certain entities in nature provide permanent and unequalled happiness. She is concerned to establish that certain entities in nature have value independent of further ends to which they are a means.

There is reason to think that some of the proponents of the instrumentalist interpretation fail to notice these ambiguities. Goodwin, for example, says that '[t]he philosophies of India ... sound a note of complete disillusionment, if not of pessimism: that nature is, or ever could be, the locus of important terminal values is uniformly denied' (Goodwin (1955), 321). Indian traditions claim that nothing in nature has 'terminal' value, however, only in the sense of value that is permanently satisfying. A tradition can deny this without denying that certain things in nature have intrinsic value.

A reconsideration of Nelson's arguments

Even if my argument against the instrumentalist interpretation is convincing, something should be said about the arguments that Nelson offers in support of the instrumentalist interpretation. The argument from pain states that since the *saṃsāric* world is inherently painful and unsatisfactory, it has only negative value. Since the *saṃsāric* world has only negative value, nothing in it has intrinsic value.

The first problem with this argument is that if the *saṃsāric* world has disvalue because it is painful, then its disvalue derives from the (at least *prima facie*) intrinsic disvalue of pain. If pain has intrinsic disvalue, however, then it is false that only the postponement of *mokṣa* has intrinsic disvalue. Nelson might insist that the disvalue of pain somehow derives from the disvalue of the postponement of *mokṣa*, but this seems implausible. How might the disvalue of the pain that I experience as a result of breaking my arm, for example, derive from the disvalue of the postponement of *mokṣa* that results from that pain? If anything, this pain is likely to help me see that *saṃsāra* is to be avoided, and contribute to my eventual attainment of *mokṣa*!

The second problem is that even if the premises of the argument from pain are true, it does not follow that everything in the *saṃsāric* world is without intrinsic value. Life in prison is painful and unsatisfactory, and ought to be avoided. From

this it does not follow that the inmates and guards lack intrinsic value. To put this point in more general terms: that some whole has disvalue does not entail that each of its parts has disvalue. To assert otherwise is to commit the fallacy of division.

Nelson's second argument, the argument from illusion, says that since the *saṃsāric* world is an illusion, it is devoid of intrinsic value. One problem with this argument is that it is not obviously consistent with the argument from pain. As I just mentioned, if the *saṃsāric* world has disvalue because it is painful, then pain is (*prima facie*) intrinsically bad. If pain is intrinsically bad, however, then presumably pleasure might be intrinsically good.

Second, while the argument from pain fails, its initial plausibility is due to the fact that (at least *prima facie*) pain has intrinsic disvalue, and this seems true even if the source of pain – and the pain itself – is somehow illusory. Likewise, however, pleasure is (*prima facie*) valuable, even if the source of pleasure – and the pleasure itself – is somehow illusory. It is better, all other things being equal, to have a dream in which I am ecstatic than a dream in which I am in misery, even if I am, in the end, not in fact ecstatic or in misery. The dream ecstasy is not valuable because it is a means to some further end, and the dream misery is not of disvalue because it is a means to some further end. The value and disvalue of these experiences are intrinsic. Hence the inference from 'X is illusory' to 'X is without intrinsic value (or disvalue)' is unjustified.

Third, even if the claim that an illusory item or state of affairs has intrinsic value (or disvalue) is a contradiction, there is some question about whether Advaita asserts that the world is an illusion. A number of authors argue, for example, that since conventional reality is characterized by Advaitins as *sadasadvilakṣaṇa* (characterized as other than real or unreal) and *anirvacanīya* (ineffable) it is false that conventional reality is simply illusory (Skoog (1996), 72). Others have argued that the claim that conventional reality is illusory arises later in the Advaitin tradition, as a result of a misinterpretation of Śaṅkara, and that Śaṅkara himself takes conventional reality to be Brahman (Rao (1996)). On either of these interpretations, the attribution of the claim that the *saṃsāric* world is illusory is false.

And finally, even if Advaita and/or other Indian texts or traditions do indeed claim that the *saṃsāric* world is illusory, and even if it is true that if something is illusory, then it cannot possibly have intrinsic value or disvalue, it still does not follow that Advaita, and/or other Indian texts or traditions deny that nature has intrinsic value. All that follows is that the tradition or text that makes these claims faces a tension between its metaphysical and moral claims (Framarin (2009)). This doesn't mean that the best way to resolve the tension is to abandon the moral claims. This, however, is just what the proponent of the instrumentalist interpretation assumes.

Conclusion

The instrumentalist interpretation states that certain Indian texts and traditions claim that only *mokṣa* has intrinsic value. If nature has value at all, it has value only as a means to this further end. I have argued that this account cannot plausibly explain the relations between *ahiṃsā*, merit, and *mokṣa*, or the relations between *hiṃsā*, demerit, and the postponement of *mokṣa*.

An alternative that avoids the objections to the instrumentalist interpretation is that plants, animals, and human beings have intrinsic value. Since they are intrinsically valuable, acting to preserve their well-being is meritorious. Since preserving their well-being is meritorious, the agent accrues merit as a result. Merit, in turn, moves the agent closer to the highest good, namely *mokṣa*. Similarly, since plants, animals, and human beings have intrinsic value, harming them is demeritorious. Hence the agent accrues demerit as a result. This demerit, in turn, postpones the agent's attainment or realization of the highest good of *mokṣa*.³

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Notes

1. My thanks to an anonymous referee at *Religious Studies* for pointing out these possible objections.
2. My own view, which I develop in a book I am currently writing, is that animals and plants have intrinsic value both because they are sentient and because they are alive. On the matter of sentience, an alternative interpretation is that the pleasant and painful experiences themselves have intrinsic value and disvalue, respectively, and that sentient beings have direct moral standing, but perhaps not intrinsic value, as a result. My thanks to an anonymous referee at *Religious Studies* for suggesting this qualification.
3. My thanks to Jeremy Fantl, Ish Haji, Roy Perrett, Mark Migotti, Dennis McKerlie, Ann Levey, the Religious Studies Department at the University of Calgary, and an anonymous referee at *Religious Studies* for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.