

Book Review

***The Philosophy of the Brahma-sūtra: An Introduction (Bloomsbury Introductions to World Philosophies Series)*. By Aleksandar Uskokov. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. ISBN: 978-1-3501-5001-0, pp. xvi, 219. \$22.95 (paperback).**

The book under review attempts to reconstruct the central philosophical tenets of the collection of aphorisms conventionally referred to as the *Brahma-Sūtras*, the foundational text of the Vedānta tradition. Right from the beginning, it is important to emphasise that this book does not aim to undertake a philological attempt to reconstruct the original text or meaning of the *sūtras*, as attempted by, for instance, P.M. Modi. While Modi's attempt, which did not rely on commentaries, was very intriguing, it requires a rigorous scholarly revision in line with modern scholarship. This reviewer considers such an investigation a 'must-have' in Vedānta historiography. With such premises I began reading the book and, initially, I was sceptical about the broad philosophical premises on which the book is based. However, a closer reading of Uskokov's book has proved me wrong. In order to interpret the philosophical principles of the notoriously unclear *sūtras*, the author employs three principles. The first principle is to directly interpret *sūtras* that are inherently comprehensible, many of which are crucial for reconstructing the philosophical doctrine in the *sūtras*. The second is the principle closest to textual criticism, which pertains to the observed consistency in the use of terminology and consistent formulaic repetition of certain phrases. Therefore, when one of these phrases is found in an unclear *sūtra*, it can be interpreted with the help of another *sūtra* in which it appears in a more understandable context. The third is the reliance on the five authors of the Vedāntic commentary tradition (Śaṅkara, Bhāskara, Rāmānuja, Nimbārka, and Śrīnivāsa). With this third principle, a challenge arises because relying on commentaries carries the risk of interpreting the *sūtras*' standpoint in alignment with the particular commentarial tradition. In relying on the commentators, the author adheres to the principle that when all commentators agree, they are likely following an older tradition closer to the original meaning of the *sūtras*. Here, he cites Ingalls, who, however, mistakenly believed that similarities between Śaṅkara and Bhāskara indicate that both follow an older tradition. This was refuted by Klaus Rüping, who demonstrated that Bhāskara merely copies and abbreviates Śaṅkara. This, of course, does not imply that there was no older common tradition of interpreting the *sūtras*. It is entirely possible that Bhāskara followed Śaṅkara where Bhāskara himself thought that Śaṅkara followed an older (oral?) tradition. Nevertheless, the existence of such a tradition still needs to be proven and substantiated by serious textual arguments; otherwise, it is conceivable that all later commentators simply follow Śaṅkara, so the agreement in interpretation can merely be agreement with Śaṅkara.

As the author himself states in the introduction, the intended audience of the book is not necessarily experts in Indology but rather individuals interested in

acquainting themselves with a wider range of philosophical concepts and ideas. For a more demanding audience, in (for this reviewer notoriously impractical) end-notes, there is also an apparatus in the form of citations from the original Sanskrit texts of the *sūtras* and commentaries, as well as other, secondary scholarly sources.

In his philosophical reconstruction of the *sūtras*, the author primarily follows the arrangement in the text itself. The analysis commences with the epistemological issue of understanding Brahman from the Upaniṣadic text and all the related issues such as valid means of cognition and the status of the text as a sacred scripture in a cognition of Brahman. Here, the author introduces an intriguing discussion about the relationship between theology and philosophy, which is found in the subtext of the idea of cognising Brahman from textual sources. The author notes that the Vedāntic theologian processes scriptural data by following the hermeneutical principles of the *Mīmāṃsā-sūtras*, which the *Brahma-sūtras* often presuppose, in order to structure the experience of Brahman in a way that textual testimony plays a role analogous to perception in everyday experience. After addressing epistemological issues, the focus shifts to ontology, especially the question of defining Brahman, causality, and individual souls. In this ontological part of the presentation, we can highlight the issue of the purpose of creation, where the author delves into the concept of play as autonomous action unrelated to purpose and benefit. After addressing otherwise relatively well-known ideas about ontology and causality, the chapter that deals with good and evil is interesting, particularly to this reviewer who has given less thought to the problem of theodicy in Vedānta. The author searches for the answers to this problem in the commentarial tradition. This includes the Śaiva perspective embodied in Śrīkaṇṭha and the illusionistic perspective as seen in Śaṅkara, along with a number of other authors (Rāmānuja, Baladeva, etc.). This chapter, which delves even beyond the *sūtras* themselves, is philosophically stimulating. The concluding part of the book deals with the questions of the individual soul, its liberation, and its relationship with Brahman, all of which the author places in the broader context of various approaches in later Vedāntic tradition.

All in all, the book is an interesting contribution to the reconstruction of early Vedāntic philosophy in the context of later commentarial tradition, as well as Western philosophical tradition, which is a welcome approach given that the book's purpose is to serve as an introduction for a broader, philosophy-interested audience.

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