

**Emotion as Indian Philosophy of Value:
Beyond Pleasure and Pain, to *Rasa* in Hindu Ethics**
Jessica Frazier

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ABSTRACT: As Jeremy Bentham noted, philosophies that do not anchor goodness in God often take the emotions of pleasure and pain as the basis of ethics. What else do people ultimately want or fear, for themselves or others? The binary idea of positive and negative emotion underpins utilitarianism and many notions of virtue and sin. Yet India, with its longstanding history of yogic introspection, has developed a more complex theory of emotions. The theory of ‘*rasas*’, or sustained complex moods, says that the simple passions are of many types, and are malleable - and able to be developed into higher-order forms. In particular, they may be scaled out according to wider or narrower concerns, or altered in qualitative character according to greater and lesser degrees of egoism. This, according to *rasa* theory, can be done through techniques of i. combining affects, ii. generalising their focus, and iii. intensifying emotional self-reflexivity, all open up the phenomenological possibilities of emotion beyond simple positive and negative passions. A broad palette of emotion can be curated through practices of self-cultivation; this in turn alters the ethical itself. Impersonal arc-emotions for instance – what Chakrabarti calls ‘Ownerless Emotions’ – may focus on the overall coherence of a situation, rather than one’s personal appetites. Or a ‘bliss’ is possible that escapes all acquisitive character. Thus in Hinduism one may seek ‘higher’ emotions that transcend egoistic impulses, and achieve other states of subjectively intrinsic value.

Just as a king is superior to other men, and the teacher is superior to his disciples, so the Great Emotions are superior to the other emotions.

Nāṭya Śāstra 7.8

While there are many themes in classical Sanskrit literatures that bear on ethics,¹ this paper starts from the perspective of emotions as the anchor for *value*. It looks at one tendency in Indian cultures to see intrinsic value as lying primarily in special states of subjective experience – that is, in the qualitative phenomenological states that range from pure consciousness to impersonal compassion, to ecstatic devotion, and so forth. In many ways, this strategy of grounding ethics in affective phenomenological states as value-bearers is not unusual; the phenomenology of intrinsically pleasant and unpleasant experiential states typically functions as the ‘intrinsic value’ that grounds naturalistic ethics when it is detached from any “divine” anchor. So unless we want to say that happiness and kindness are good ultimately because God makes it so, then we will likely say happiness is good because it is pleasant, and kindness is good because it cultivates pleasant happiness.

¹ See Perrett 2016 for a good overview of different ethical themes in Hindu literature, including the ethical pluralism toward life goals, the social ethics of dharma, yogic virtues of restraint and non-harm, and the deontological character of ritual injunctions.

Indeed, if we do not pin value to God or something like a Platonic Good-in-itself, then the only purely “natural” locus of value may be human feeling. As Bentham observed, all morality seems to be tied to the ‘throne’ of pleasure and pain.² Similarly, Śāntideva, a Buddhist philosopher of the radical Sceptic school of Madhyamaka, bypassed uniquely ‘religious’ ethics by holding that pain ‘is to be prevented’ simply ‘because of its quality as pain’.³ Many philosophers worldwide have seen qualitatively positive and negative emotions as the basis of ethics.

But why do pleasure and pain alone hold the throne? Might a wider-reaching phenomenology of affective states incorporate other value-bearing feelings, leading to other kinds of action? And might some find that the ego and its dictates “are not an ineluctable condition of my being” (Boruah 2016, 144), but can rather be replaced by less ego-centred ways of assessing, desiring, and acting? In a *natural axiology* – an ethical criterion that derives its axiological values from natural factors – philosophising about ethics depends partly on philosophising about emotions and their complicated relation to the ego.

In what follows we will consider Hinduism as a culture that, by and large, rejects divine command theories – the idea that Goodness is defined as the following of divine commands – and with those theories also rejects the notion that what is intrinsically good to do is ‘inscribed in the heavens and guaranteed by God’, as Iris Murdoch (2001, 78) put it.⁴ Instead many strands approach ethical issues from the perspective of a wider phenomenology of affective states. The ultimate goods may well be states to be sought – but the Hindu sources we look at here see them as ranging beyond mere pain and pleasure. They extend to more complex, generalised, higher order feelings like aesthetic savour, yogic peace, devotional ecstasy, communal concern, or philosophical understanding. This transformation and elevation of selfhood is itself a characteristic concern of Hindu literatures from Vedānta through Yoga, to the tradition of aesthetic theory that will be the focus of this short study.

This chapter suggests that:

- a) rather than accord intrinsic value only to the ‘simple passions’ of pleasure and pain, we should see these as nested within a larger ‘moral phenomenology’ of other intrinsically value-bearing affective states. For Hindu culture these may include an ‘impersonal subjectivity’ (Boruah 2016), ‘ownerless emotions’ (Chakrabarti 2009), the purely self-reflexive consciousness cultivated in classical yoga, or the ecstatic kenosis cultivated in devotional traditions.
- b) all such states, according to most Indian traditions, are malleable in ways that may intensify, simplify, or scale-up their scope – potentially altering their intentional object, their acquisitive structure, and diminishing the influence of the ego.
- c) altruistic concern for others usually stands as something of immense instrumental value to these phenomenological goals (see Frazier 2021), but do not themselves constitute the primary soteriological value.

Mapped against the usual conceptions of ‘religious’ ethics, we can see this expanded moral phenomenology as a product of India’s historical interest in cultivating special forms of experience – an interest of which yogic meditation traditions are but one manifestation, ecstatic religious practice is another, and Indian attempts to rightly experience the core nature of all things are yet another.

² See Bentham 2007, 1.

³ *Bodhicāryāvatāra* 8.102, Williams 105-6: *duḥkhatvād eva vāryāṇi niyamas...*

⁴ Hindu culture includes other ways of thinking about ethics, including *dharma* or natural order in Brahminical culture, and for Mīmāṃsā the brute obligation of ritual action.

Naturalism and Egoistic Appetites

Hindu and Buddhist thought might both be seen to share:

- a) a tendency to see ego-diminished states as one key to cultivating ethical life,
- b) an independent interest in the soteriological value of such states.

Buddhism's attempts to derive an anti-egoistic ethics from epistemic and metaphysical scepticism about the existence of a self have been widely discussed in recent literature such as Williams 1998, Pettit 1999, Siderits 2000, 2007, Clayton 2001, Wetlesen 2002, Harris 2011, Westerhoff 2015, Garfield 2021. In contrast Hindu traditions tend to affirm the metaphysics of the self, and also to affirm the existence of a divine reality. It can be tempting to try to tie Hindu culture's ethics to its belief in a divine reality. But deities rarely give out ethical rules, and some schools are even atheistic, so that many agree that this would be a wrong turn and that Hinduism essentially develops its approach to ethics along naturalist lines. Certainly, schools like Vedānta typically see the divine nature as what English language users would call 'good' in the sense of being intrinsically of value. But this 'goodness' is of a different kind from *moral* goodness which concerns best actions for sentient beings. Hindu theologians do not typically think in terms of it being *morally virtuous* to align with the divine, or *morally reprehensible* not to. The worldly actions of humans are a matter of the natural world, our social relations, and our own psychology. In theistic literature, deities regularly dispense advice on how to reach the state of liberation or the bliss of devotion. But we are free to listen or not, and to choose various goals as we see fit. As Krishna says at the end of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (BG), "I have explained to you this knowledge... reflect on this deeply, and then do as you wish."⁵

Within this naturalistic approach, most agree that Hinduism is *pluralistic* about the valid goals of life, and *utilitarian* about the importance of upholding basic shared prerequisites for living. Sanskrit literature's oft-cited four classic goals of pleasure, success, social righteousness, and liberation (*kāma*, *artha*, *dharma*, *mokṣa*) are taken as a sign of ethical relativism (e.g. Ramanujan 1989, Matilal 2002, Heim 2005, Ram-prasad 2007, Long 2018, Lipner 2019). Further, the narrative ethics of the Hindu epics (the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmayaṇa*, and other Sanskrit and vernacular long-form stories) depicts *dharma*, or right conduct, as a slippery thing that requires subtle discrimination in each situation, and a complex psychological art of restraint and discernment. The hero who is moral in the sense of benefitting others shares much with the philosopher who can assess cause-and-effect, and the yogi who is able to de-couple from his egoistic passions.⁶ But the broader goal here of following one's social duty still seems utilitarian: values of courage, discrimination, restraint, or even yogic non-violence and control (see Perrett and Pettigrove 2015) all function instrumentally to allow the community of individuals to achieve what is needed for life, and each proceed to choose their preferred goal. Thus they are less virtues than consequentialist prerequisites (Frazier 2022, 6) for any agency directed at meaningful experience.

This throws us back upon the idea of states of being that are desirable in themselves – in conventional parlance, because they are *good* to undergo. Here we are on the potentially familiar ground of Bentham's theory of pleasure and pain and Plato's image of the person as a chariot led on by wild autonomous appetites that lead us along like unruly horses (Phaedrus 246a-254e)⁷ rather, for instance, than Moore's universal sense of Goodness *simpliciter*. But, of course, Plato's view of human taste was more complex than this. He accorded high value to reason which could redirect the chariot of the self toward the Good and produce a transformation of the person itself into something that

⁵ Iti te jñānamākhyātam... vimṛśryaitadaśeṣena yathecchasi tathā kuru; *Bhagavad Gītā* 18.63.

⁶ Some have interpreted dharma as a set of deontological duties (Sreekumar 2012).

⁷ Hindu philosophy's own version of the chariot metaphor can be found in *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 3.3–4.

exists and desires and enjoys differently – a soul that itself is *of the nature* of the Good. Plato introduced into Western philosophical tradition the central distinction between raw appetite, and the realm of curated extra-ordinary feelings (extolled in texts like the *Symposium*). With this he drove a wedge between appetitive motivations, and other possible states able to be cultivated into existence, and curated in their precise character. This wedge has maintained a subtle place in Western ethical thinking; in a critique of Bentham for instance, Hare noted that pain and the larger phenomenon of suffering are not the same thing, nor pleasure and the broader, deeper, over-arching state of happiness (Hare 1981, 92). The moral is that naturalism relies on the appetites as the site of intrinsic value... but the appetites are not as simple as they seem.

Pleasure, pain, and bliss in Indian thought

Indian traditions of thinking similarly insert a wedge between mere pleasure/pain, and feelings that be cultivated through phenomenological manipulation of one's experiential state. In what follows, first we give a short genealogical sketch of Hindu notions that life is led by the attraction to pleasurable emotions such as happiness, desire, bliss... and eventually *rasa* as a higher-order state. We then identify three different 'functions' by which *rasa* theorists sought to transmute raw emotions into qualitatively new phenomena. It is these more complex, less egoistic states that lie on the other wide of the wedge from mere pleasure and pain.

Happiness and suffering (*sukha-dukhā*) were certainly acknowledged as a major factor in human life from the classical period onward in India. Suffering-avoidance was a widespread concern. But due to growing scepticism about pleasure's sustainability as a state of mind, pleasure came to be conceived of as *part of* suffering, which was duly reconceived in larger terms as *dissatisfaction* – any affective state (usually appetitive) that inevitably leads to disappointment. Indeed, the equation of pleasure with ultimate dissatisfaction came to pervade many genres of Indian literature, including classical Sanskrit upaniṣads (classical reflections), sūtras (philosophical treatises) and their bhāṣyas (commentaries), gītās (teachings or 'songs') and saṃvādas (debates), and other philosophical styles of discourse. The Nyāya logicians went further, formalising in logical terms the invariable concomitance of pleasures with eventual pain. They argued that suffering is not contingently linked to pleasure, but is rather essentially embedded in it since dissatisfaction is part of the necessary condition of finitude that accompanies all worldly experience (see Chakrabarti 2001, 72 on classical Hindu motivations for liberation). This idea that even pleasant states can be a second-order source of suffering prompted a reframing of all feeling. Pleasure (*kāma*), intense emotion (*rāga*), or thirst (*trṣṇā*) signified a negative insatiable, involuntary appetite linked to a pessimistic account of all consciousness, and an agonistic narrative of inner struggle against the inescapable limits of life.

Other, 'higher' kinds of mental states attracted interest, insofar as they were not subject to the same acquisitive, dissatisfying character as pleasure and pain. The *Brhad Aranyaka Upaniṣad* subjects *all* desires to the higher goal of being "beyond hunger and thirst, sorrow and delusion, old age and death. It is when they come to know this self that Brahmins give up the desire for sons, the desire for wealth, and the desire for worlds..."⁸ The linked pair of happiness and suffering (*sukha* and *duḥkha*) became a distinctive trope expressing the nature of embodied life in the world, and one of the factors that limit human agency (e.g. *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 1.1-2⁹ and *Mānava Dharma Śāstra* 1.26). The spiritual advice given in the *Bhagavad Gītā* aligns pleasure and suffering with winter and summer, coming and

⁸ *Brhad Aranyaka Upaniṣad* 3.5.1.

⁹ brahma-vādino vadanti | kiṃ kāraṇaṃ brahma kutaḥ sma jātā jīvāma kena kya ca saṃpratiṣṭhaḥ | adhiṣṭhātāḥ kena sukhetareṣu vartāmahe brahmavidō vyavasthām || kālaḥ svabhāvo niyatir yadrccā bhūtāni yoniḥ puruṣeti cintyam | saṃyoga eṣaṃ na tu ātmabhāvād ātmāpy anīṣāḥ sukhaduḥkhaheṭoḥ || *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 1.1–2).

going, and gain and loss, victory and defeat (2.14, 2.38); all are motivating poles that one should transcend.¹⁰

In classical Vedāntic literature, the ultimate reality of Brahman, and the state that understanding of it brings, could be used to downplay pleasure and pain: the happiness attained by knowers of Brahman was greater and more sustainable than that associated with finite personal concerns.¹¹ There is a hint of the Platonic style of ascent-via-desire in some accounts which acknowledge that both desire and desirelessness, and a wide range of other states stand within the gift of the self's phenomenological range. Thus "whatever world a man, whose being is purified, ponders with his mind, and whatever desires he covets; that very world, those very desires, he wins" (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.2.10). We are assured that "what a man turns out to be depends on how he acts and on how he conducts himself... A man turns into something good by good action and into something bad by bad action. And so people say: 'A person here consists simply of desire.'" But "a man who does not desire... whose only desire is his self... Brahman he is, and to Brahman he goes." (*Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.5-7).

The lesson of texts like these is that we have power over our desires, and alongside them there exist non-desiderative states that transform not only one's motivation, but also one's *self*. This ethically motivating capacity of affects had significance for Hindu spiritual traditions of self-transformation: emotions became 'techniques of the self', as Foucault would have it. Stoic non-feeling was positively developed as *śānta*, or the peaceful state. But its affective status was often ambiguous: was it a substantive feeling of well-being, or merely an absence of negative affects? Opinion was divided, and similar debates surrounded the Buddhist ultimate goal of *nirvāṇa*. In some accounts *śānta* seemed merely a 'severance from connection with suffering' (*duḥkha-saṃyoga-viyoga*; BG 6.23) in which the passions are calmed. In others it seemed to describe a more substantive affective state with a distinct quality of its own with some infinite or eternal object as its focus; BG 5.21, for instance, speaks of an infinite happiness, a *sukhaṃ akṣayaṃ*.

This version of 'peace' as a non-acquisitive, non-specific, non-finite yet positive state began to look much like an affect and developed its own separate history in classical Indian thought: *ānanda* or bliss. Bliss had a long history arguably rooted in the intense and self-contained character of sexual pleasure,¹² but its philosophical ascendancy went along with the rise of the concept of Brahman understood as a universal divine reality at the heart of all things.¹³ In some sources it was counterposed to the action and anxiety of normal life: "He who knows that bliss of Brahman, he is never afraid. He does not agonize, thinking: "Why didn't I do the right thing? Why did I do the wrong thing?" A man who knows this frees his self from these two thoughts" and further attains all one's desires.¹⁴ The *Bhagavad Gītā* defined bliss as a "limitless happiness that the mind achieves when it goes beyond the senses, and this firm state does not vary. Having gained that state, one does not

¹⁰ There was also a 'humours' model of emotion associated with the Sāṃkhya school of thought and its three cosmological dispositions of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, or *sattva* 'light/clarity', *rajas* 'heat/energy', and *tamas* 'dark/lethargy,' and also a 'subconscious impulses' model attributing attitudinal dispositions to past influences (*saṃskāras* and *kleśas*). Purushottama Bilimoria gives a brief survey of conception of the emotions in Indian thought, ranging through classical and tantric yoga, Sāṃkhya, Abhidharma Buddhism, Jainism, Ayurveda, Mīmāṃsā, and very briefly, *rasa* theory in Bilimoria 1995, 67-71.

¹¹ E.g. *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 6.12.

¹² See Olivelle 1997 for a detailed history of the early meanings of *ānanda*. We see that it has a direct sense of sexual pleasure in earlier literature and can indeed be used to indicate some reward of sacrifice, and thus a desirable pleasure in a more mundane sense. It is with the gradual growth of *mokṣa* and *Brahman* as prominent late Vedic ideas that *ānanda* becomes aligned with a different kind of endless or self-satisfying enjoyment.

¹³ E.g. BU 3.9.28.7, 4.3.32.

¹⁴ *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.3.

consider any other to be greater.”¹⁵ Over time, this served as one powerful motivator for interest in Brahman, which otherwise might be seen to lack a substantive reward. As a theological conception of the divine, Brahman was not linked to a ‘heaven’ of pleasures, but to a higher state of being. The *Brahma Sūtras*, a classical precis of Vedāntic arguments for a single encompassing foundational reality, devoted eight sutras to arguing that Brahman should rightly be identified as yielding bliss.¹⁶

Bliss retained a distinctly soteriological implication. But beyond religious literature other notions of selfless emotion such as *bhāva* or *rasa* – enduring emotional moods – emerged as part of the practical sciences of dramaturgy and poetics. The tradition of *Rasa* theory, or reflection on aesthetic emotions, systematically modelled the ontological nature of such states and mapped out ways in which they could be cultivated. While there is not scope in the present paper to provide a detailed genealogy of *rasa* ideas *per se*,¹⁷ we will highlight three ‘flashpoints’ in the tradition’s history, each of which introduced some core conception of how lower emotions can be transmuted into higher ones. They variously argued that transitory affective responses can be curated into higher emotions through a) combination, b) generalisation, and c) self-reflexivity. This process came to lie at the heart of religious life for a number of schools of Hindu philosophical theology. For some peace, for others, passion, and for still others, awe or wonder were the goals of spiritual life – partly because they corresponded with a correct understanding of reality and its divine foundation.

Echoing the imagery of emergence (in chemical processes and artistic creations) found in non-classical Sāṃkhya and Āyurvedic accounts of selfhood,¹⁸ *rasa* theory counters philosophy’s common focus on simple emotions with an account of emergent affects. Accounts by Bharata, Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka and Bhoja suggest a phenomenology of higher-order states that possess intrinsic value, but are less immediately egoistic than the blunt appetite for pleasure or painlessness.

Intensification and Combination in Bharata

The classical Nāṭya Śāstra or ‘dramatic manual’ of Bharata (compiled somewhere around c. 200BCE-200CE) drives a wedge between direct, personal emotional responses on one hand, and ‘aesthetic moods’ experienced across a wider narrative arc. The celebrated sixth chapter of the manual depicts the latter as something that must be *developed*, through the juxtaposition of complex elements, and the intensification of quotidian feelings that naturally arise. Actually drinking blood in a cremation ground with ghouls, for instance, is one thing – but enjoying the art of macabre horror stories (so popular in our own time) is quite a different experience. So too, someone longing for a beloved is a powerful subjective emotion; but that emotion becomes something of a different order when transmuted into romantic literature expressing, intensifying, and reflecting on that very feeling. Horror becomes the macabre, amazement becomes the fantastic, sexual attraction becomes high romance. The c.8th century grammarian Daṇḍin describes the intensified version of emotions as an elevation of the original state to the ‘supreme grandeur’ of sentiment or spectacle.¹⁹

In addition to intensification, emotions can be combined so that they build upward from the conjunction of subsidiary minor responses into an affective arc. Conjunction (lit. linking together; *saṃyoga*) is depicted as a necessary catalysing causal agency in generating new states, the precise

¹⁵ sukham ātyantikam yat tad buddhigrāhyam atīndriyam vetti yatra na chaivāyam sthitaś chalati tattvata. yaṃ labdhvā chāparam lābham manyate, *Bhagavad Gītā* 6.21

¹⁶ BS 1.1.5-11. See Chakrabarti 2001 for an interesting exploration of approaches to liberation as a positive experiential state (usually equated with bliss).

¹⁷ See the excellent introduction in Pollock 2016.

¹⁸ See Frazier 2022, 5.

¹⁹ See Pollock 2016, 65.

nature of which depends on the specific ingredients and proportions. The basic emotions are considered to be eightfold, comprising four negative (sorrow, anger, fear and disgust) and four positive (desire, wonder, humour and energy) kinds, and a complex range of subsidiary states (e.g. despair, fatigue, intoxication, anxiety, confusion, remembrance, shame, pride, depression, sagacity, etc.). In art, these can be blended in different ways through the course of a scene. These combinations of subsidiary feeling (*vyabhicāribhāva*), with the environment and persons in which they are set (*vibhāva*), and the physical expressions by which we come to share feelings (*anubhāva*) together generate the overarching moods (*sthayibhāvas*).²⁰ The main emotion manifests slightly different tones particular to each setting or circumstance.²¹ This means – importantly – that the higher emotion thereby generated can be curated just as a recipe can, and this is indeed the most important creative task of the author. The *Nāṭya Śāstra* offers an analogy or *dṛṣṭānta* for this kind of causation: it is like flavours mixed into a yoghurt base to make a tasty drink that, like all masalas or spice-mixtures, has a new flavour all its own.²² Thus:

Just as taste arises from the conjunction of various condiments, spices, and substances, so *rasa* arises from the presentation of various factors and emotions. That is to say, just as physical tastes, that of lassi, for instance, or other such drinks, are produced by substances such as brown sugar plus condiments and spices, so the stable emotion, in the presence of the various factors and emotions, turns into *rasa*.²³

In *rasa* theory's alchemy of emotion, pleasure and pain have no special place above the other states. Heroic vigour or compassion can be as motivating as fear or passion (*vīrya*, *karuṇā*, *bhaya*, and *rati*). Further, the process of proportional adjustment might allow us to transform the overall effect into a different dominant mood; minor notes of sorrow or loss can sharpen the dominant feeling of love, transforming it from saccharine romance into poignant passion. Moments of disgust or anger can ultimately drive us to greater heroism, or alternatively to seek detached ascetic peacefulness. The overarching moods exist in a fruitful dialectic with the subsidiary affective responses.²⁴ We no longer have a polarity of attraction and aversion.

Generalisation in Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka

But all emotions remain personal and applied, until they are purified into something more abstract through a process of generalisation. The *Nāṭya Śāstra* had implied that once the combinatorial process is complete, a further process of universalisation (*sāmānya*; 7.6) is needed to turn the stable mood into an aesthetic value. By distancing the emotion from one's own history and situation, the feeling becomes abstracted and detached from the ego. This idea was subsequently taken up by thinkers who sought to illuminate emotions and motivations not merely *in art*, but also *in the real world*. Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka was a 10th century aesthetic theorist with a background that made him sensitive to the metaphysical and ethical implications of his ideas. He was a Vedāntic theologian, but he was also a Mīmāṃsaka²⁵ linguistic theorist familiar with ideas that meaning is something which naturally arises from the right conjunction of words. He saw meanings as phenomena in which ingredients of one

²⁰ Vibhāvānubhāvavyabhicāribhāvasaṃyogād rasanīṣpattiḥ ; Nāṭya Śāstra (NŚ) 6.31.

²¹ Rasa theory is not India's only poetics; A.K. Ramanujan discusses the approach to context in Tamil poetry (of which he was a master translator) and notes that here too combinations of setting and interiority build up the mood: there is 'a taxonomy of landscapes, flora and fauna, and of emotions – an ecosystem of which a man's activities and feelings are a part. To describe the exterior landscape is to describe the interior landscape.' (Ramanujan 1989, 50).

²² NŚ 6.31.

²³ NŚ 6.280-282, translation from Pollock 2016, p.50-51.

²⁴ See Pollock's examples of discussions about the fruitful combination of rasas in 2016, 161-165.

²⁵ Mīmāṃsā was a school exploring injunctive language and certain notions of ritual duty.

ontological kind (words) can give rise to emergent phenomena of another (intentions, actions, and events). In his aesthetic theory he seems to have applied this to imagination, emotion, and ethical motivations (see Pollock 2016, 145).²⁶

He emphasised that there are arc-emotions or sustained moods (*sthāyibhāvas*) that have not yet attained the higher-order value-state of *rasa*. The key transformative factor, he suggested, is emotion's generalisation into a wider ownerless, participatory state of context-free affect. He developed Bharata's brief reference to a *sāmānya* or general state of emotion in the *Nāṭya Śāstra*, theorising that one can apply a generalising cause to emotion (*sādhāranīkaraṇa*, or 'commonisation' factor as Pollock translates it; 2016, 18). The result is an 'ownerless' state (Chakrabarti 2009) of experience that resonates well with Yogic and Buddhist ideas that we are capable of states in which little or no sense of ego is subjectively felt to be present.

So emotions seem to possess potential stages of development. As Ramanujan put it, 'In the realm of feeling, *bhāvas* (basic feelings) are private, contingent and context-roused sentiments, *vibhāvas* are determinant causes, *anubhāvas* the consequent expressions. But *rasa* is generalised, it is an essence' – and similar ontological progressions are also found in language's generation of meaning from sounds and words (Ramanujan 1989). Our ability to diminish our egos plays a central role here. Such states might be likened to Nietzsche's idea that art effects 'a sense of transformed identity, in which awareness of one's ordinary roles drops away' (Higgins 2007, 43). Pollock brings out the way that Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka's theory transferred the structures of generalised ethical language ("one ought") into generalised emotional judgements that may be acted out by another person but that "are nonetheless meant for you and that you somehow make your own and act upon." (2016, 145) The process by which some emotional force crosses from its locus in a character (e.g. Romeo), and inspires an experience and consequent action in the audience, was called *bhāvanā*. The observation that emotions can leap from person to person, and expand in scope, suggested that – while they need to happen in someone's mind - they need not be anchored to a particular person, situation, or personal goal. King Lear's tragedy moves us, and may even motivate us, but all with a diminished sense that the feeling is 'about' oneself.

Generalisation leads to a state of absorption in which, freed from real-world distractions, we are able to fully immerse ourselves in the emotional state and reach unlimited impersonal heights. Later commentators brought out the bliss-like character of this. As Simhabhupala (14th century) said of the tale of King Rāma, 'the stable emotion that Rāma feels can be experienced by the spectator, and by without the least disruption through improper [over-association], in an experience whose nature is pure blissful absorption' (Pollock 2016, 154). Yet the *rasa*-theorist and theologian Abhinavagupta emphasised the implication that such experiences can only arise in otherworldly (*alaukika*), non-applied contexts like fiction. If the intentional object is fictional, there is no impetus to actual action to distract our phenomenological development. By contrast, Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka saw the fictional and actual worlds as more continuous, making use of what Boruah calls our 'modal' imagination (Boruah 2016). Fictional events can:

...be the source of profound emotional attachment without giving up their illusory character', and can thus be 'a means of understanding the true ends of man.. [and] the same applies to the universe as a whole, which functions in precisely the same way. It consists of a vast elaboration of nothing but names and forms, and yet, thanks to the capacity we derive from

²⁶ Many early, largely secular, *rasa* theorists rejected this transposition from the aesthetic sphere to the real world because they saw personally embodied and lived emotions as incapable of being generalised. Dhanika expresses this (see Pollock 1998, 141).

it for “learning, meditating” and so on, it can aid us in reaching the highest end of man. (from the *Nāṭyaśāstravyākhyā*, trans. Pollock 2016, 148)

This is ethics in the sense of a method for detaching from immediate personal concerns, and learning to cultivate wider emotions that are more like the general sense of goodness or objectively approving, outrage or indignation, compassion or non-acquisitive affection. In short we see here emotions that resemble what we mean by general ‘values’ in everyday English language use.

Self-Reflexivity for Bhoja

A third technique for cultivating ‘rasa’ emotions through self-reflection was advanced by the celebrated 11th century theorist King Bhoja of Paramara. He emphasised the importance of something for which Western traditions of thought have little or no word, but which is usually translated as ‘savouring’. Here this describes the unique phenomenological attitude that consists in intentional attention to the qualitative character of an experience. Where Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka drew on the ontology of meaning to develop his theory, Bhoja’s account was rooted in his analysis of the phenomenological structure of consciousness. His idea was that our consciousness always already entails some self-reflexive perception of its qualitative content; we not only see the apple and taste its sweetness – we also perceive our perception of the apple, and note our tasting of the flavour. This extra intentionality towards our intentional states is always there, entailed in the structure of experiencing things. Further, this self-reflexive feature of consciousness is never value-neutral, but always entails a kind of ‘enjoyment’ of the particular phenomenological state. The implication is that we don’t just ‘receive’ information when we perceive; we actively savour its qualitative content to different degrees, as when we note the red in a rose, or feel the sadness of the fact of our own sadness. Bhoja called this *abhimāna*, and saw *rasa* as what happens when we *willfully* savour experiences in this way, and with a passionate intensity. The new emotion that we feel has the whole complex situation of experiencing as its object, incorporating the subsidiary feelings²⁷ and overarching mood.²⁸ It is ‘what enables us to experience the world richly’, and also to experience the subsidiary affects and situational components as sublated into a single unity, an ‘inherently a quasi-intersubjective phenomenon’ that subsists ‘between the subject represented and the subject reading’ (Pollock 1998, 126, 129).

What is the purpose of cultivating such an experience, for Bhoja? Pollock links his explanation to a prior Sāṃkhya account of ‘sense of self’ as the realisation that all phenomenal experiences happen ‘for’ a self who is their enjoyer and agent, and the reference point of their structure.²⁹ Agency is thus reassigned to a self that is not to be assimilated merely to the experiences at hand, but is ‘the core nature of personality’ *per se* (Pollock 2016, 112). Bhoja did not focus on real-world moral implications, although he generally seems to have seen literary texts as making ‘moral arguments’ that one should cultivate.³⁰ But again the implication is that we can act in relation to an understanding of the self as a kind of impersonal universal enjoyer, an experience that takes us into realms of purer, less egoistic values. The tenth century thinker Abhinavagupta combined the generalisation and self-reflexive theories into a single conception of higher emotion that frees the subject from the specificity of their own contingent situation, so that we can savour the bliss that ‘is simply one’s own awareness’, and

²⁷ Here the term used for the conjunction of circumstances that causes the emergence of *rasa* is *sāhitya*, rather than *saṃyoga*.

²⁸ Bhoja’s insistence that *rasa* is continuous with a universally available function of consciousness itself informs his apparent view that *rasa* can happen in life outside of aesthetic contexts – a view that was unusual in the longstanding debates about the *location* of *rasa* (whether in the characters, the text, the poet, or the audience).

²⁹ See Pollock’s (2016, 112) application of Vacaspatimiśra’s commentary to Bhoja.

³⁰ Pollock 2001 reads his views on the unity of literature, the goals of literary revision, and the nature of a protagonist.

the universal structures of consciousness are revealed.³¹ It thus achieves a soteriological effect, aiding self-elevation, understanding of the values that pertain to the world as a whole, and 'liberation' from the bonds of the ego and one's personal desires.

The Moral Value of Higher Emotions

If 'ethics' in the sense of reasons for *altruistic* (or at least co-operative) interpersonal relations is largely advocated through theories of dharma,³² then here we have explored 'ethics' in the different sense of an axiology of intrinsic value, grounded in affective states. Here, beyond the familiar passions of pleasure/happiness and pain/suffering, there stands a whole treasure-house of affects in which the cruder elements of ego-centric, insensitive, simplistic and blinkered perspective are pared away. They may still function as 'horses' that pull the chariot of individual agency through life. But they pull in quite a different way from the wild stallions of pleasure and pain against which both Plato and Krishna warned us.

As Bharata points out, such emotions are less like appetites, and more like affective arcs that span diverse circumstances and immediate stimuli, triangulating subsidiary concerns into overarching ones. As Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka shows, they often supersede personal desires and goals because they are linked with our ability to identify with persons beyond ourselves. And as Bhoja suggests, there is a special kind of enjoyment in them – a qualitative character we feel to be of subjective value – that is different from that which attaches to sensory pleasures. The abstract feelings of being in love or being awed, of humour, heroic energy, or even compassion and horror (all being *rasas*), each carry within them a savouring of the very experience of self-in-the-world. The result is a synthetic, depersonalized emotional value that stands to simple pleasures almost as a Bildungsroman stands to a verbal injunction, or a symphony to a musical phrase, or a chieftain's judgement about the welfare of his community to a child's desire to eat. The developed form is dialectically transformed by complexity, generality, and reflexive awareness of the distinctive quality of the experience itself.

There were extensive debates in aesthetic theory about whether the specific attitudes of aesthetic *rasa*, achieved through art and according to *rasa* techniques, can be applied to real, everyday life. Nevertheless, such arc-emotions seem to capture the complex texture of real life better than the donkey-and-carrot model of appetite to which Bentham alluded. Arguably, we are not primarily directed by pleasures and pains, even instrumentally; we often pursue experiences that do not fit well into standard notions of pleasure, such as challenges and changes, the flourishing of family even when it may create inconveniences, the creation of new projects, communal happiness beyond our immediate sphere, and fresh experiences of unknown value. One might imagine the human emotional landscape as a mandala or series of concentric circles with immediate basic responses at the centre, changing most quickly, and the larger arcs of *rasa*-like mood at the slower moving, more stable, all-encompassing outer rings.

But finally, how might such a conception relate to religion, if at all? A systematic approach to the Hindu phenomenology of value states might better have started with close analysis of the *Yoga Sūtras*: they offer one of the earliest and best expressions of India's typical interest in decentring the ego, withdrawing its appetitive tendencies, and curating a different phenomenological 'shape' for consciousness. Further, Yoga is a recognizably soteriological tradition (although soteriology is not its only use). It thus seems to fit the template of 'religious' ethics better than *Rasa Theory* which has largely secular, śāstric roots. Yet classical Yoga is an essentially stoic tradition sceptical of emotion,

³¹ See Pollock 2016, 190 for a summary of this view in Abhinavagupta.

³² As I argue in Frazier 2021, 6-9.

whereas Rasa Theory celebrates affective experience, and speaks more directly to issues of worldly motivation.

Perhaps then it is best to grasp the “immediate and obvious problem” by the horns and acknowledge with William Schweiker that “‘ethics’ or ‘moral philosophy’ is not indigenous to the world’s traditions’ (Schweiker 2008, 1). This means we must redefine for ourselves what constitutes ‘religiosity’ in ethics. A major theme in Indian traditions is the cultivation of higher-order, ego-decentred phenomenological states. In this connection Bharata, Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, and Bhoja offer insights into ways that consciousness can be moulded into experiences of a *different kind/stage of value* from that with which we more routinely engage. India’s classical heroes often exemplify such states – from the heroic striving of kings like Arjuna, to the unlimited compassion of the Buddha, to the selfless kenotic passion of devotees like Rādhā. Such attitudes can offset egoism and encourage a more communitarian mindset; in this sense they are morally beneficial to others. But this remains merely a side-effect: they have their own intrinsic (often ‘spiritual’) value for the experiencing subject. Non-harm can be a side-effect of Yogic practice primarily aimed at peaceful absorption in consciousness, and compassion can be a side-effect of the Bodhisattva path primarily aimed at escaping misplaced sense of self (e.g. Clayton 2001, Garfield 2011). So here selfless feelings are a product of our aesthetic response to ever-wider situations, reaching outward to the world as a whole. In this, India reminds us that there are more phenomenological states on heaven and earth than those brief pleasures and pains that punctuate quotidian life “like the flickers of a fire-fly”, as Udayana puts it (Chakrabarti 2001, 72). Its various transformative religious traditions remind us that techniques for achieving higher states lie within our grasp, if only we reach for them.

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