

**Christopher G. Framarin. *Hinduism and Environmental Ethics: Law, Literature, and Philosophy*. 192 pp. London and New York: Routledge. 2014. – Reviewed by Elisa Freschi (Austrian Academy of Science)**

The book is, as frequently the case when Framarin writes, very clearly argued. In each chapter, the Introduction anticipates the gist of the argument and the Conclusions summarise it again. Each step is fully argued for by taking into account all possible scenarios. Thus, as with his previous book, *Desire and Motivation in Indian Philosophy* (2009), the book starts with long discussions of the competing views and only at the end reaches the view which is the one Framarin endorses. For his own argumentation, Framarin appeals to intuitions, in the way analytic philosophers do. An example of the intuitions he uses is the intuition that in the case of a car accident we should save the person involved, although this could lead to harming a plant. Slightly less controversial (in my opinion) is the intuition that *ceteris paribus* we should prefer humans over animals and animals over plants, but I will come back to that later.

A further asset of the book is that it is an extensive bibliographical survey of Anglophone literature related to the topic of environmental ethics in Hinduism. I wrote “Anglophone” because most articles and books cited are either originally written in English or are quoted from their English translations, but an important exception are Framarin’s

important references to Madeleine Biardeau's interpretation of the episode of the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest in the *Mahābhārata*.

Framarin analyses the literature with utmost attention, the kind of attention other scholars (probably: me included) only reserve for primary texts and extracts out of the scattered or systematic remarks of the various scholars three competing interpretations of why flora and fauna should have a moral stand in "Hinduism" (the category is not further problematised and is implicitly considered to be co-extensive with the texts directly analysed (the *Mahābhārata*, the *Mānavadharmasāstra* and the *Yogasūtra*) or evoked within the author's interpretative frame (primarily Śaṅkara's and Rāmānuja's *Bhāṣya* on the *Brahmasūtra*). Framarin labels the first interpretation "Instrumentalist interpretation" and explains that according to it we should avoid harming flora and fauna because non-violence leads to merit and merit leads to good things, whereas violence leads to demerit, which leads to bad things (thus, non-violence is instrumental to something else). The second interpretation is the "Interconnectedness interpretation", according to which we should avoid harming flora and fauna because, due to *karman* and rebirth, we are all part of the same continuum and sooner or later the harmed animal will in turn harm us. The third interpretation, called "Sameness Interpretation" holds that the whole world, including flora and fauna, is either an emanation of *brahman* or nothing but *brahman* erroneously conceived as something else. Thus, we should not harm it because the *brahman* has moral standing.

Framarin shows how all interpretations have flaws (actually, he is so convincing that the flaws seem obvious). Framarin discusses the issue with much more detail but starting with the last theory, the main problem appears to consist in the fact that if the world is (as with the Advaita Vedānta-flavored version of the Sameness interpretation) just illusion and only the *brahman* exists, then there is nothing bad we can do at all when we affect the illusory world, whereas if the world is an emanation of *brahman* (as with the Viśiṣṭadvaita Vedānta-flavored version of the same interpretation), then the theory is just wrong, since hair also emanates from human beings, and yet

it does not derive from this derivation the fact that it has also moral standing. The Interconnectedness interpretation is wrong, among other things, since it stands on premises not found in the texts (which do not mention interconnectedness as a value) and since it leads to the counter-intuitive conclusion that all living beings have equal moral standing. Last, the Instrumental interpretation does not work, since this leads to the counter-intuitive conclusion that if *ahiṃsā* ‘non-violence’ led by itself to salvation, although flora and fauna had no moral standing, then this would lead either to circularity (*ahiṃsā* leads to *mokṣa* because it is meritorious but, given that fauna and flora have no moral standing, it can only be meritorious because it leads to *mokṣa*) or to arbitrariness (*ahiṃsā* leads to *mokṣa* by chance), which is counter-intuitive.

By contrast, Framarin maintains that the texts he examines (*Mahābhārata*, *Mānavadharmasāstra*, and *Yogasūtra*, henceforth MBh, MDhŚā and YS respectively) uphold the moral standing of flora and fauna on the basis of the fact that they say that *ahiṃsā* leads to merit and merit leads to pleasure. Now, given that this pleasure is not instrumental to liberation (in fact, it might even be counterproductive, as shown by the fact that in heavens, where there is too much pleasure, no one can reach liberation), it must have an intrinsic value. If it has an intrinsic value, then it makes sense that causing pleasure to one is at least a *prima facie* reason for performing a certain action. The reverse applies to pain and its intrinsic disvalue. Thus, entities which can feel pleasure and pain have moral standing (with “moral standing” being described as that which should orient our actions).

So far, so good, or even very good, and the book (which contains way more than I could summarise here) recommends itself as a clear and analytic study of the issue both for analytic philosophers and for Sanskritists, especially for the ones interested in the topic of “nature” and in the three texts examined by Framarin.

Given that the book solved all it directly raised, in the following, I will focus on some questions the book raised only implicitly, hoping to initiate a discussion with Framarin and other present and future scholars.

1. Is it really the case that the circumstance in which “a human agent must choose between destroying an animal and allowing a plant to live, or destroying an animal and allowing a human being to live” is *not* a “genuine moral dilemma”? I agree that we would all save the human being trapped in the car, but would we necessarily save a tree over an insect? Or a rare tree over a common rat? Or over a starfish which is reproducing too fast and devouring coral reefs? And, more importantly, is the fact that we would save the human being trapped in the car, even if this meant killing thousands of rare plants and rare animals, a moral choice or just a speciesist choice, just like the choice of one who would save her own sibling even if this meant letting thousands of other people die? In other words, in this case, I am not sure Framarin’s use of intuitions is as uncontroversial and straightforward as he takes it to be.

2. Framarin’s argument from the intrinsic value of pleasure to the moral standing of flora and fauna seems to me to neglect an aspect of the question, namely the fact that the texts speaking of pleasure and pain as the results of merit and demerit could be just trying to engage people of lower intellect, who would not understand that the only thing which really counts is *mokṣa*. Thus, they could claim that merit leads to pleasure because claiming that merit leads to *mokṣa* would not be enough to motivate people to undertake a certain meritorious action. I think we can still reasonably argument (as Peter Singer does, and as Śaṅkara and Arindam Chakarabarti do, see p. 86 and p. 121 of Framarin’s book respectively) that pain is in itself bad and that we need to avoid it for us and for any other being. But I am not sure that the intrinsic value of pain follows directly from merit according to the texts (MBh, MDhŚā and YS) that Framarin quotes. In other words, Framarin examines in detail the normative claims explicit and implicit in MBh, MDhŚā and YS and tries to find out how they can be consistent. Personally, I appreciate this attempt and the implicit methodological reliance on the principle of charity. Still, I wonder whether one could imagine a more sophisticated (or more complicated) discourse strategy in the texts examined (for instance, one akin to the Buddhist theory of *upāyakaṣālya*

‘[use of] appropriate means’, which explains why the Buddha in Aśvaghōṣa’s *Saundarananda* tells his brother Nanda to join the Buddhist dharma so that he can obtain heavenly *apsaras* ‘nymphs’, although the final goal remains in fact only *mokṣa* and the *apsaras* serve only to convince Nanda to undertake the path).

3. One of the reasons that Framarin quotes in favour of his final interpretation is the fact that it “contribute[s] to an explanation of the common Hindu dietary recommendations [=vegetarianism, EF] that the other accounts have trouble explaining” (p. 165). However, vegetarianism could also be justified on the basis of the fact that plants are deemed not to be sentient at all, a position which was common in philosophical texts (see Schmithausen 1991a, 1991b, 1991c and 2009, unfortunately not present in the bibliography of Framarin), although common sense assumptions of the lay people might have rather run against it. That is, the evidence of *philosophical* texts points to a rationalist trend among South Asian philosophers, who ostensibly distinguished themselves from another position. This position, being non- or pre-philosophical, is not discussed in a philosophical way, but can be reconstructed out of the philosophical reactions to it, as follows: common people probably shared some sort of animist belief in the aliveness of animals, plants (and in some cases also of the basic elements like earth and water). Philosophers reacted listing arguments against the sentience of plants. However, from time to time and when discussing other issues, even philosophers may involuntarily go back to ways of saying attesting of the belief in the sentience of plants. One of such instances is the formula “from Brahmā to grass”, to refer to all living beings, from the highest to the lowest ones. Long story short: Buddhist and “Hindu” philosophers would have no problem explaining that eating plants is legitimate insofar as plants are not sentient and I think that Framarin should have discussed this possible explanation of vegetarianism. I imagine that Framarin could easily reply that he is not concerned with all possible explanations of each nature-related behaviour, but only with the three more general theories he outlines at the beginning

and that he does not focus on all Indian philosophical texts, but only on MBh, MDhŚā and YS, which is completely legitimate, but leads me to the following point:

4. The only aspect of the book I am not completely satisfied with is its dealing with generic categories such as “plants”, “animals” and “Hinduism”, although (see Freschi 2011 and 2015, and, more importantly, Findly 2009 and Schmithausen 2009, which contains Schmithausen’s reply to Findly) Indian authors distinguished between the status of grass and that of trees, that of cattle and that of wild animals and although different Indian schools had different attitudes towards these issues. But, again, *ad impossibilia nemo tenetur* and no one can expect an author to take everything into account!

Framarin’s book has been reviewed by me also on the Indian Philosophy Blog (<http://wp.me/p486Wp-vm>). Interested readers might want to check there Framarin’s replies to the above observations, with additional hints to further direction of research, from the idea of moral standing being at least partly dependent also on the duration of a living being’s life-span (so that a tree would have on this account a greater moral standing than an insect) to its being dependent also on one’s importance for other beings. The latter topic is particularly relevant in the case of pets, see Killoren forthcoming.

## References

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