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Theistic Theodicy of the Indian Philosopher Udayana (10th Century)

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Abstract. Udayana, a prominent 10th-century Indian philosopher, belonged to the *īśvara-vāda* tradition, a theistic school of Indian thought centered on *īśvara*, a personal Divine Absolute. This paper examines the significance of Udayana's discourse on theodicy, particularly in light of contemporary debates, such as J. Sterba's critique of theistic responses to the problem of evil: How can the existence of God be reconciled with the existence of evil? Udayana, in line with other Indian (and ancient) philosophers, posits that *īśvara* coexists with primordial and eternal matter – atoms – whose combinations constitute the cycle of *karma-samsāra*, the realm where evil originates. While this cosmological compatibility of God with the source of evil might appear to render Indian theism more vulnerable to criticism than monotheism, Udayana argues that the all-powerful and all-perfect *īśvara* constructs the world solely out of benevolence and is not responsible for evil, which stems from human karmic actions. According to Udayana, God is ontologically and morally irreconcilable with evil. Although *īśvara* does not create primordial matter, He controls and directs all karmic processes (*adr̥ṣṭa* – the unseen force of karma) with their inherent good and bad deeds, ultimately alleviating human suffering from evil at the end of each cosmic cycle. As a keen medieval polemicist, Udayana demonstrates a remarkable capacity to address contemporary challenges to theism.

Keywords: theism, Indian philosophy, Indian theism, *īśvara-vāda*, argument from evil

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Теистическая теодицея индийского философа Удаяны (X в.)

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Аннотация. Удаяна, выдающийся индийский философ X в. относится к направлению *ишвара-вады*, или индийского теистического учения об *Ишваре* – личном Божестве. Исследование подчеркивает значение дискурса Удаяны, особенно в контексте современных дискуссий о теодицее (полемика Дж. Штербы с теистами): почему Бог попускает зло? действительно ли существование Бога несовместимо с существованием зла? Удаяна, как и другие индийские (а также античные) философы признает, что Ишвара сосуществует с первичной и вечной материей – атомами, комбинации которых составляют круговорот кармы-сансары, сферу, где зарождается зло. Хотя эта космологическая совместимость Бога с источником зла может показаться более уязвимой для критики, чем монотеизм, Удаяна утверждает, что всемогущий и всесовершенный Ишвара со всеми его совершенствами производит мир исключительно в силу своей благодати и не ответственен за зло, так как все злые кармические деяния исходят от людей. Бог, согласно Удаяне, онтологически и морально не совместим со злом. И хотя Ишвара не творит (из ничего) первичную материю (атомы), Он тем не менее полностью контролирует и направляет кармический процесс (*адришту* – невидимую силу кармы) со всеми его благами и дурными деяниями, а в конце каждого космического периода прекращает страдания людей, причиненные злом. Удаяна, как яркий средневековый полемист, имеет прекрасные потенциальные возможности, чтобы ответить современным вызовам в сторону теистов.

Ключевые слова: теизм, индийская философия, индийский теизм, ишвара-вада, аргумент от зла

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Udayana, a prominent Indian philosopher of the 10th century, was associated with the *īṣvara-vāda* group. *Īṣvara-vāda*, the teaching (*vāda*) concerning *Īṣvara* (the personal Divine Absolute), is an inter-scholarly Indian theistic doctrine. It

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asserts the concept of *Īçvara*, which originated in the Upanishadic period and later developed into an authentic metaphysics within classical Indian philosophy. Key proponents of Indian theism included the Hindu systems of Yoga (termed '*seçvara-Sāmkhya*' – '*Sāmkhya* with *Īçvara*'), Nyāya, Vaiçṣika, and, in part, Vedānta. Udayana, a member of the Nyāya School, presented highly sophisticated and elaborate proofs for God's existence [1; 2] and theodicy. He also effectively countered anti-theists (*nirīçvara-vādins*), particularly in his seminal work, "*Nyāya-kusumāñjali*" (NK), meaning "A Handful of Nyāya blossoms [offered to *Īçvara*"]". Medieval sources suggest that Udayana's successful refutation of the *nirīçvara-vādins*, primarily Buddhists, led to their decline on the Indian intellectual scene.

This paper will highlight some of Udayana's main arguments for God's existence within the context of theodicy, and explore relevant contemporary perspectives from the 20th and 21st centuries. N. S. Dravid [3] and Bhaswati Sinha [4], diligent English translators and interpreters of the "*Nyāya-kusumāñjali*" (NK), have initiated Udayana's engagement in broader international discourse. Kisor Chakrabarti, in his examination of Udayana's critique of a *nirīçvara* doctrine, emphasized the enduring relevance of this remarkable Indian philosopher's works, despite its current lack of sufficient academic attention [5. P. 11].

Theistic trends, recognized globally, argue for Divine Personality in contrast to pantheism or panentheism, both of which advocate for an impersonal Absolute. Many scholars concur that the core of theism lies in the concept of a Personal God, the Creator/Demiurge and Overseer of the world [6]. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on 'Theism' describes the panorama of theistic movements and specifically defines the Indian version: "The supreme God, *Isvara*, has the personal name Prajapati, Viçvakarman or some other"¹. In the theistic outlook, with which Udayana aligns, the Personal God is considered both transcendent and immanent, making Udayana's relevance today quite understandable.

Udayana's theodicy is intrinsically linked to his proofs of God's existence. This paper aims to demonstrate the significance of Udayana's discourse, particularly in light of modern theodicean polemics, and to address key issues explored in Udayana's "*Nyāya-kusumāñjali*" (NK) [3; 4]. J. Sterba initiated a recent discussion challenging contemporary theists [7]. In essence, J. Bishop summarized the focus of Sterba's critique as 'theistic personalism,' which portrays God as a "supernatural, immaterial, person with the omni-properties" [8. P. 150]. Bishop notes that theistic personalism, for him, is vulnerable to criticism from atheists and analytic philosophers. The anthropomorphic conception of God, they argue, presents Him as a moral agent responsible for the world's evil, a notion deemed nonsensical for an almighty God. However, even theistic personalism, according to contemporary thinkers, possesses considerable capacity to respond to and refute its critics. J. Bishop advocates for broadening the scope of the discussion to encompass

¹ Theism. In: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 11 ed. Vol. XXVI. Cambridge University Press; 2005. P. 747. Available from: https://archive.org/stream/encyclopediaibrit26ed11larch/encyclopediaibrit26ed11larch_djvu.txt (accessed: 11.07.2024).

the ontological sphere, moving beyond purely ethical and logical considerations. Consequently, the problem of the compatibility or incompatibility of God's existence with evil necessitates an examination of its ontological status in relation to God.

J. Sterba's criticism of theism can be summarized by three core theodicean questions:

(a) Do God's attributes necessitate evil, implying an internal flaw?

(b) Does God coexist with evil as a primal, eternal matter, or is evil a cosmological partner?

(c) Is God ultimately responsible for evil?

These questions are inherently linked.

(a) Regarding God's attributes: Theistic belief generally holds that the Divine Being is free from imperfections, moral evil, and deficiencies in goodness. Evil is often explained by natural necessity, much like the "shadow of goodness" in pantheistic views where divinity and the world are one, or in Stoic theodicy. Dualistic systems, such as Pythagoreanism or mythologies with opposing deities, also accommodate the natural necessity of evil. Udayana, however, diverges from pantheism by attributing only perfect qualities to Īṣvara. These include: 1) super-consciousness (*buddhi*); 2) and 3) unified desire (*icchā*) and effort (*prayatna*); 4) internal unity; 5) almightiness (*aīṣvarya*); and 6) a demiurgic motive. As a wise and merciful Artisan, God creates, sustains, and continuously cares for the world. Furthermore, Īṣvara is recognized as the Author of the Vedas, initiating all the "*Logoi*" of the universe (NK. II. 1) [3. P. 106–107]. Nyāya philosophy identifies Īṣvara as the Supreme Self (*Paramātmā*), thus immune to suffering, malice, or emotions. He also lacks karmic merit and demerit (which drive universal evil) due to His eternal, supernatural essence.

Within the context of God's attributes, we must also consider the nature of the relationship between God and the world. Udayana posits two causal chains: an empirical one involving material forms (*rūpa*) determined by karma, and a mental one (*buddhi*) ultimately governed by Īṣvara (NK. I. 4–6). Udayana argues that the phenomenal world exhibits a diversity of causes (*hetu*) and a multiplicity of their operations. This diversity demonstrates the world's complete dependence on Īṣvara, as an infinite regress of causes (*regressus ad infinitum*) would otherwise result from occasional or mutually dependent effects, leading to absurdity or chaos.

Udayana addresses the problem of infinite regress by adopting a medieval realist stance, akin to Aristotle's rejection of matter's inherent capacity for self-motion. Udayana argues that dependent effects are not self-sufficient; they lack inherent being (*svabhāva-varṇanā*) (NK. I. 5).

To halt this infinite regress, Udayana posits a steady, intellectual Cause that governs numerous physical cause-effect relationships. Udayana illustrates this with the example of a plant produced by a seed. Employing the logical tools of Indian syllogism, specifically the *dṛṣṭānta* (a visible empirical example), he demonstrates the obligatory link between a single seed and a single sprout (NK. I. 4 auto-comm.).

He then generalizes this to establish a universal causality between any seed and any plant, asserting that this can only be grounded in Supreme Consciousness/God. Udayana contends that the world requires conscious guidance [3. P. 8], a guidance that is not a pantheistic intermingling but a theistic supervision. A common analogy in Indian philosophy, particularly within Nyaya, for the cause-effect relationship between God and the world is the Potter and the pot. In Īçvara, we recognize a divine Potter, much like an antique Demiurge. If the world, like a pot, depends on God, then all natural causes are subordinate to supernatural ones (*a-laukika*² – NK. I. 4), meaning they are subject to God's wisdom. While the karmic law that governs all natural processes, including good and evil, was not created by Īçvara, it is entirely controlled by him. In this regard, Udayana's argumentation echoes the ancient Greek metaphysical tradition, from Plato and Aristotle to Thomism, where the essence of all being and intelligible being are consubstantial or identical, while all badness is relegated to the physical universe.

(b) The question of God's compatibility or incompatibility with evil necessitates an examination within the context of cosmology. If Īçvara is not the Creator *ex nihilo* but rather a Demiurge, then a passive material, serving as a potential source of evil, must exist alongside him. Indeed, for Udayana and the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school, Īçvara/the Demiurge, in producing a pot or the world (NK. I. 4; V. 2), utilizes pre-existing, disintegrated, and uncreated atoms (*aṇu* – 'one part', *paramāṇu* – 'the smallest part'). These are the primeval and eternal material of the world. In the famous eight proofs for God's existence, the second proof, termed 'combination' (*āyोजना*), posits that at the universe's inception, an intelligent Subject or their volition must conjoin passive, isolated, non-conscious atoms. This Subject is, of course, Īçvara (NK. V. 4, NK. V. 6). While atoms themselves are devoid of evil, when combined by Īçvara after each cosmic cycle of designing and dissolution (*sarga-pralaya*), they bear the karmic consequences from previous periods. These consequences encompass both good and bad. Consequently, the karmic process functions as an 'eternal moral order,' akin to natural law, in which Īçvara does not intervene but rather supervises and upholds its inherent lawfulness.

Indian and other ancient theists can address the question of God's cosmological compatibility with evil as a response to Sterba's critique. This discussion centers on the ontology of good and evil and their relationship to the Divine reality. The pan(en)theistic approach in world philosophy views evil as a part or shadow of the Absolute. Consider the Stoics, who spoke of the necessity and inevitability of evil. Even Plato taught about the requirement of a 'mother,' 'space,' or 'nurse' – essentially, 'otherness' – alongside the Demiurge and the realm of ideas for cosmic genesis. This 'mother' or 'nurse' was the source of evil ('Theaetetus' 176a; 'Timaeus' 92c). Plotinus, sharing the core tenets of Platonic philosophy, described matter and evil as relative non-being (*me on*) in contrast to the divine One, Bliss which is super-being. This non-being, he argued, was not created but existed

² '*A-laukika*' translates to 'non-this-worldly'. This is in opposition to 'Lokāyata', a materialistic philosophy whose name means 'this-worldly going.'

eternally. Analogous to Plato's 'space' or Plotinus' non-being, the atoms (*paramāṇu*) of Udayana and the Naiyāyikas-Vaiśeṣikas represented eternal matter coexisting with Īṣvara, possessing a status of lesser being compared to God. All these doctrines assumed that God's compatibility with non-active matter as the source of evil was solely from a cosmological perspective. However, the ontological status of that matter was considered null or exceedingly vile in relation to the divine Reality, understood as true being or super-being.

Ontologically, Indian theism posits an irreconcilable divide between God and matter as the source of evil. They occupy opposing realms of being, with God maintaining complete control and subordination over the "shadow" or evil aspect. Unlike some mythological frameworks where gods and demons may alternate dominance, Īṣvara never relinquishes his governance over a world permeated by evil. Īṣvara's motivations for the world's composing and destruction are consistently benevolent; he initiates the world for the well-being of creatures, governs it, and ultimately destroys it to alleviate suffering. Udayana, in NK (II. 1), argues that only God can bring about the continuous cycles of creation and annihilation: "...since creation and annihilation of the world may occur again and again... therefore there is no go but to admit the reality of God (*Parameṣvara*) to explain the uninterrupted existing of religious tradition" [3. P. 106–107]. Thus, while acknowledging God's cosmological coexistence with the source of evil, Udayana simultaneously asserts their ontological incompatibility.

This cosmological coexistence raises the question of God's responsibility for evil, a third problem (c). Indian philosophy addresses the issue of evil through the operation of the karmic law. The universe, composed of atoms (*paramāṇu*) and their combinations in Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, develops according to this law, which produces both good and bad deeds and their consequences. The universal karmic process, or nature itself, is eternal, uncreated, and impersonal, functioning as a deterministic force. However, individual humans, with their free will and intentions, generate karmic impulses. Consequently, the responsibility for the world's evil rests entirely with creatures, not with Īṣvara – this is the general Indian theistic, including Udayana's, response to problem 'c'.

Specifically, Indian theodicy explores the relationship between Īṣvara and the karmic cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*). To resolve the theodicean problem, Indian theists explain how Īṣvara manages and governs karma. After the initial constructing through atomic conjunction, Īṣvara oversees the karmic process, acting as an intelligent supervisor or, dispatcher who directs all karmic impulses to ensure order and prevent chaos. The karmic process/*adr̥ṣṭa* (invisible) is subordinate to Īṣvara. Indian theists have grappled with reconciling the concept of a benevolent Īṣvara with the reality of karmic evil. Bruce Reichenbach, one of severe J. Sterba's opponents, analyzed the nuances of this problem in Indian philosophy in his book "The Law of Karma" [9]. A specific discussion of the relationship between Īṣvara and karma within Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika can be found in Chapter VIII of C. Bulcke's work [10. P. 51]. Due to its complexity, a detailed examination of the topic of Īṣvara and karma is beyond the scope of this discussion.

The coexistence of Īṣvara with the source of evil, from a cosmological perspective, does not imply God's responsibility for evil. *Nirīṣvara-vādins* (Buddhists) challenged Indian theists, particularly Udayana, with the theodicean question of Īṣvara's demiurgic motive: was it egoistic or for the sake of creation? Buddhists argued that both motives contradicted a benevolent God, given the prevalence of misery and suffering in life.

In response, Udayana, in his "*Ātma-tattva-viveka*," addressed these opponents. He emphasized Īṣvara's Divine will (*icchā*) as the driving force behind creation. Īṣvara possesses no egoistic motives and is filled with compassion and love, designing the world solely for the happiness of creatures and destroying it to end the world's evil. This position enriches the established theistic theodicy, which asserts that God cannot be held responsible for the vices of creatures. S.N. Dasgupta explained this theistic theodicy from the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika perspective: "Īṣvara begins about this creation not for any selfish purpose but for the good of all beings" [11. P. 324]. Furthermore, the destruction of the world to its constituent atoms "is not an act of cruelty on the part of Īṣvara, for he does it to give some rest to the sufferings of the living beings... He is like our father who is always engaged in doing us good" [11. P. 326]. Thus, God's compatibility with evil (the source of evil) in the cosmological realm does not make God a moral agent subject to moral judgments, as Īṣvara is a supernatural Absolute, transcending the 'moral order' created by creatures. Consequently, J. Sterba's criticism of theism is irrelevant in this context.

J. Sterba's criticism, aimed at undermining theism, encountered strong opposition [8]. In my view, most of Sterba's opponents (above-mentioned J. Bishop, B. Reichenbach, and others) have thoroughly refuted him from a Christian perspective, as in providenciology and hamartiology, God the Creator *ex nihilo* is neither cosmologically nor ontologically compatible or reconcilable with evil. Compared to strict monotheism, Udayana's theodicy may be more vulnerable to critique because Īṣvara does not create primeval matter, which necessitates acknowledging karmic evil existing in a latent form even after the world's destruction. Nevertheless, Udayana possessed powerful theistic arguments that remain relevant today. a) Īṣvara's inherent qualities exclude any evil; b) although God is cosmologically compatible with the karmic natural-moral chain, His ontological priority allows Him to oversee and direct the world's evil, ultimately ceasing its operation for the benefit of creatures at the end of each period. c) God Īṣvara is not responsible for evil because it arises within the *samsāra* cycle and is entirely dependent on negative human actions.

Udayana's works are a cornerstone of Indian theism – *īṣvara-vāda*. His creativity, clear logic, and dialectics enrich metaphysics and the philosophy of religion, making a "valuable contribution to rational theology and theism" [4. P. xiii]. In contemporary debates, the works of this prominent Indian philosopher could contribute to theodicean arguments. However, many aspects of Udayana's work remain unexplored and require further, in-depth research.

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