

HPS208 – How we think about life

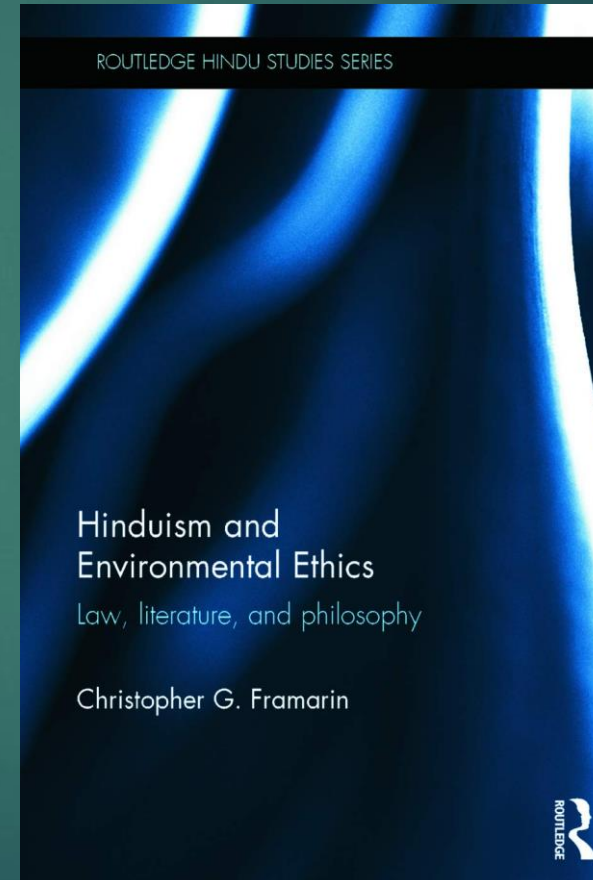
Last Week

- ▶ We talked about animal sentience
- ▶ We saw that it's very hard to say anything definite without a theory of sentience in general
- ▶ We were somewhat unsatisfied with the criteria provided by the ASENT project, as the authors themselves were
- ▶ They relied on behavioural and neurological tests, but what we really want to know is what it's like from the point of view of an organism itself



Hindu Environmental Ethics

- ▶ This week we'll look at the question of sentience and ethics from a broadly Hindu perspective
- ▶ They have an account of what makes something sentient
- ▶ Our main reading defends a pretty basic tenant of this debate, that we owe something to non-humans
- ▶ But I'll pull some arguments from this book by the same author to explore what the basic Hindu metaphysics of sentience mean for environmental ethics



Environmental Ethics

- ▶ But first, what is environmental ethics?
- ▶ It's mostly what it sounds like: the sub-discipline that asks what our ethical obligations are towards the natural environment
- ▶ There are two forms those obligations could take: *prudential*, and *intrinsic*



Prudential Obligations

- ▶ It is a truly bad idea for us to burn every forest and boil the oceans, because all humans would likely die, and presumably we care about humans
- ▶ That is a prudential reason – it looks at the environment as a means to some end, i.e., keeping us alive
- ▶ But this is anthropocentric reasoning, putting humans at the centre of things



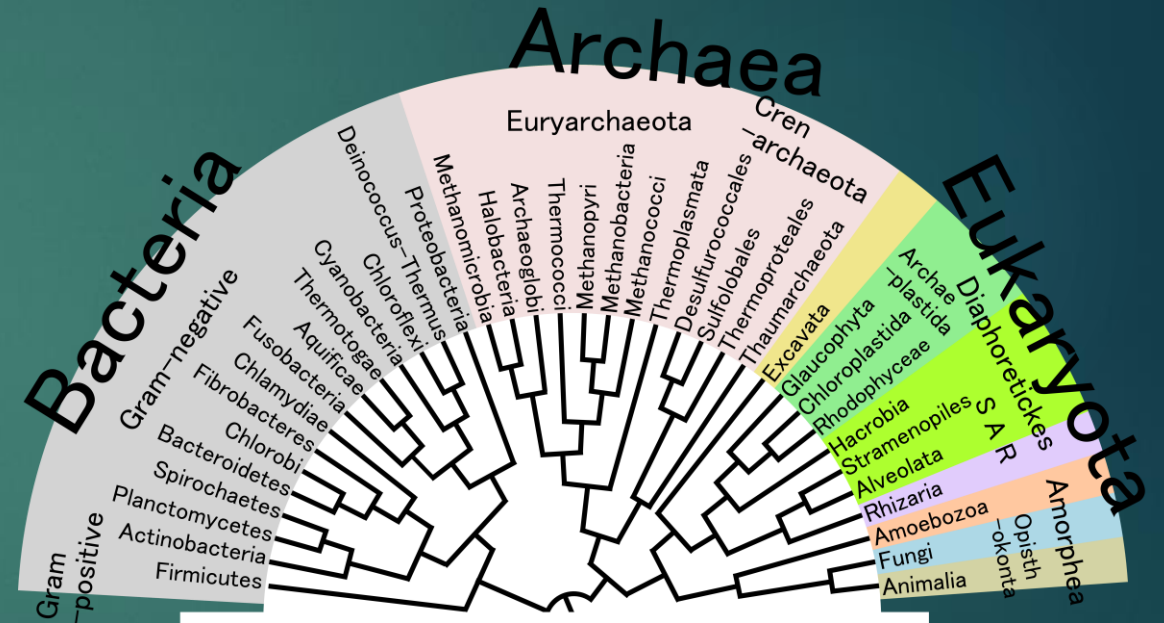
Intrinsic Obligations

- ▶ In addition to caring about keeping ourselves alive, environmental ethics often involves concerns about non-human living things for their own sake
- ▶ Call this type of ethical consideration *intrinsic*
- ▶ The question here is: how much consideration do we owe to the interests of non-human organisms?



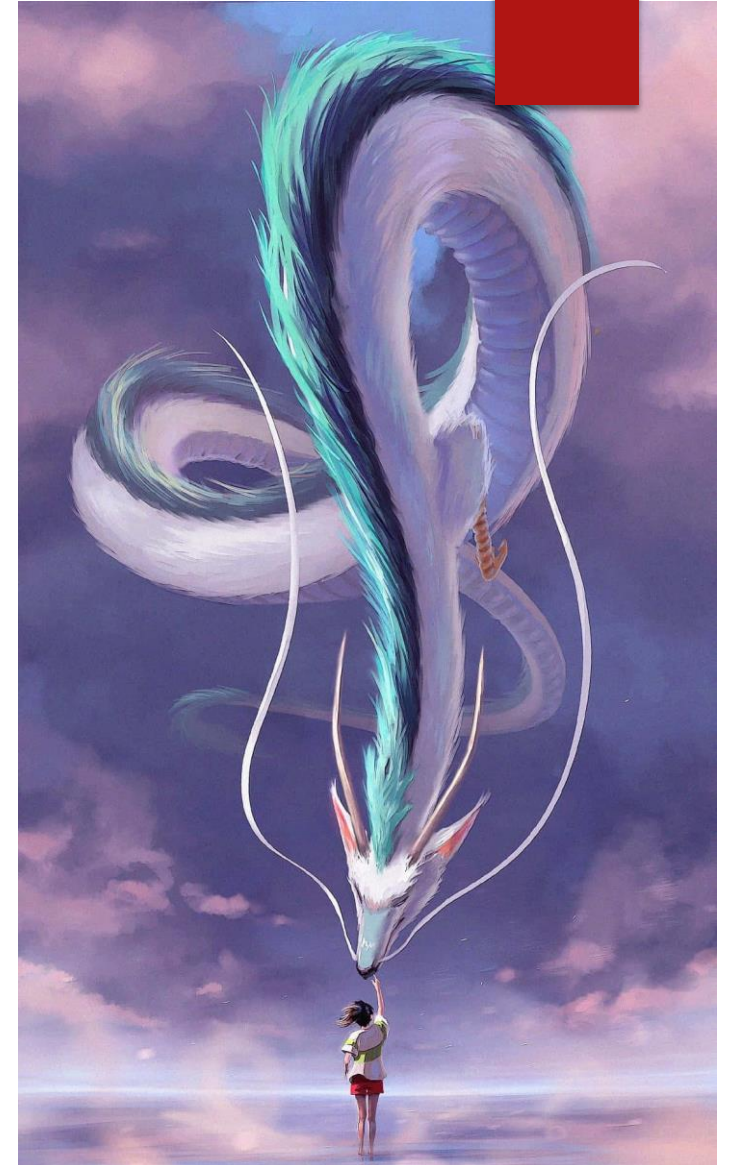
The Scope of Environmental Ethics

- ▶ This should sound familiar from last week, where we talked about the intrinsic value of animals
- ▶ Environmental ethics also considers the intrinsic interests of plants, as we will this and next week
- ▶ More controversially, some have argued that we should also consider the intrinsic interests of whole ecosystems, or geological formations like mountains and rivers



The Personhood of Rivers

- ▶ Various people around the world have assigned personhood to parts of the natural world like mountains or rivers
- ▶ E.g., Morris and Ruru argue that rivers should be legally recognized as persons in New Zealand law, since the Maori regard them as ancestors
- ▶ This would allow human representatives to argue on their behalf in court, in the same way that representatives argue on behalf of a human who cannot do so on their own behalf
- ▶ Morris, J. D., & Ruru, J. (2010). GIVING VOICE TO RIVERS: LEGAL PERSONALITY AS A VEHICLE FOR RECOGNISING INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' RELATIONSHIPS TO WATER?. *Australian Indigenous Law Review*, 14(2), 49-62.



Our Main Reading

- ▶ The reading this week was this one by Christopher Framarin
- ▶ Here his goal is pretty straightforward: defend the idea that a plausible environmental ethic should attribute intrinsic value to non-human parts of nature
- ▶ The central argument he uses is a kind of thought experiment, and is very general in scope

Hinduism and Environmental Ethics: An Analysis and Defense of a Basic Assumption

Christopher G. Framarin

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The Last Man

“The last man (or person) surviving the collapse of the world system lays about him, eliminating, as far as he can, every living thing, animal or plant (but painlessly if you like, as at the best abattoirs). What he does is quite permissible according to basic chauvinism [that is, anthropocentrism], but on environmental grounds what he does is wrong. Moreover one does not have to be committed to esoteric values to regard Mr. Last Man as behaving badly.”

► (Routley, 1973, p. 207)



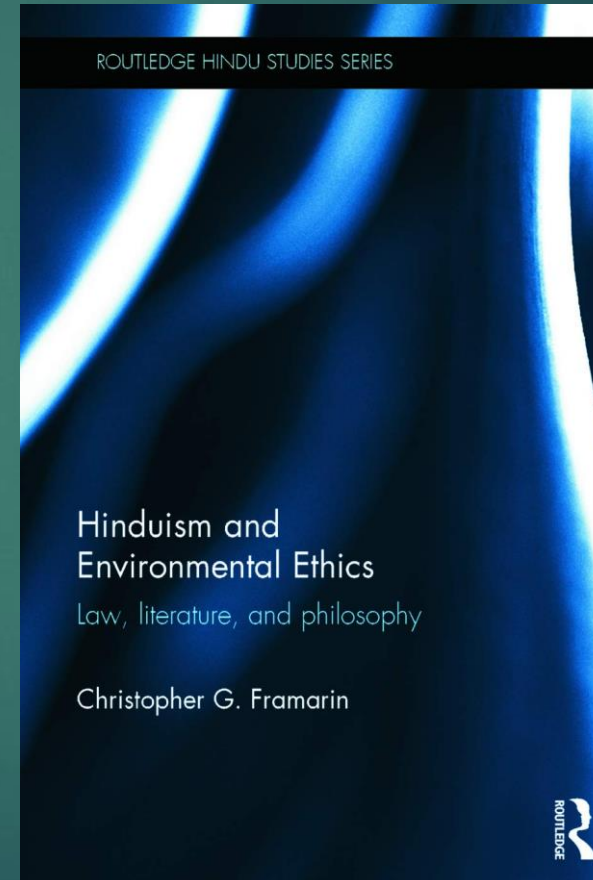
The Last Man

- ▶ Framarin notes that this argument seems to intuitively work for both plants and animals
- ▶ If the last surviving person burned down an old growth forest for fun, that still seems wrong even if no animals are hurt
- ▶ Framarin also asks us to image it is the last person's final hours alive, so that we eliminate the concern about bad habits developing etc.
- ▶ It's the destruction itself that seems bad



Hindu Environmental Ethics

- ▶ Let's turn now to some issues more specific to Hinduism
- ▶ In this book, Framarin goes into more detail on why specifically Hinduism provides a plausible environmental ethic
- ▶ He considers a number of proposals in the literature on this, and we'll look at a few



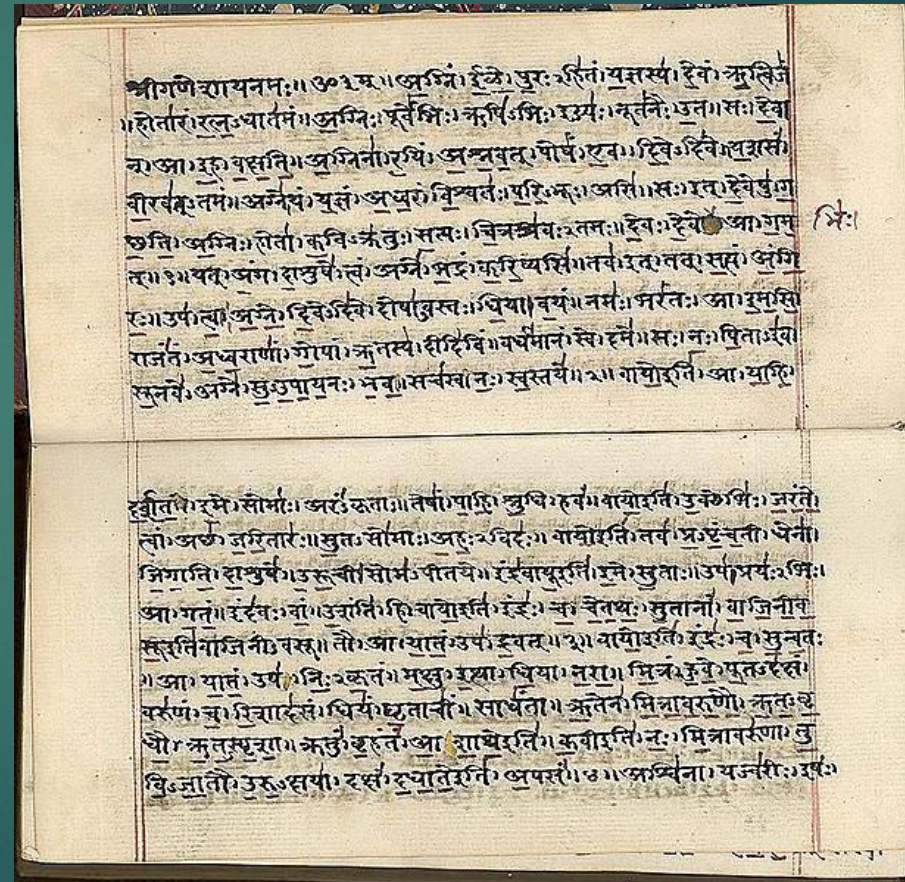
Hinduism(s)

- ▶ First, what is Hinduism?
- ▶ It's not really appropriate to think of it as a single religion
- ▶ Culturally, socially, and philosophically, Hinduism contains a bunch of different threads
- ▶ But one of the things that unites these threads is a common ancient literature called the Vedas



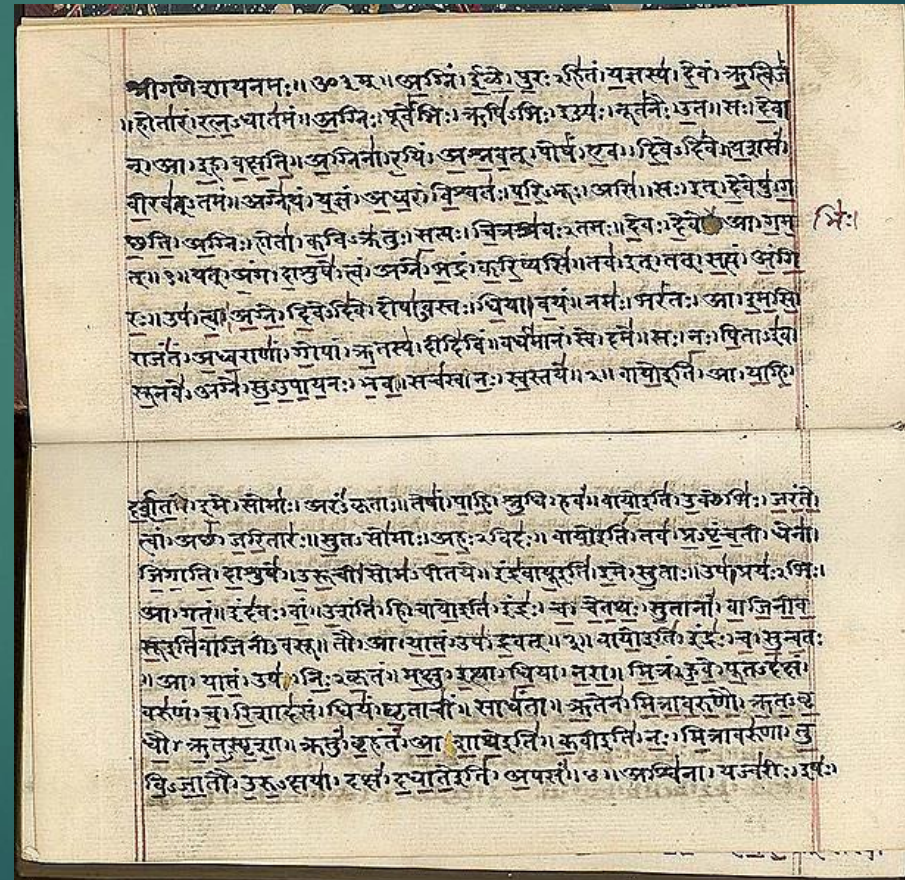
The Vedas

- ▶ The Vedas are a (massive) collection of texts, which form the oldest layer of Hindu literature
- ▶ They are regarded as authorless, having being transmitted from superhuman sources long ago
- ▶ They were orally transmitted for thousands of years, using an extremely rigorous set of mnemonic practices to ensure accurate transmission



The Vedas

- ▶ They include a wide variety of material, from descriptions of rituals, to stories about gods, to philosophical discourses
- ▶ There are six main 'orthodox' schools of Indian philosophy, each with their own interpretation of the central messages of the Vedas
- ▶ But Framarin draws on some of the most central and agreed upon points to build his analysis



A Theory of Sentience

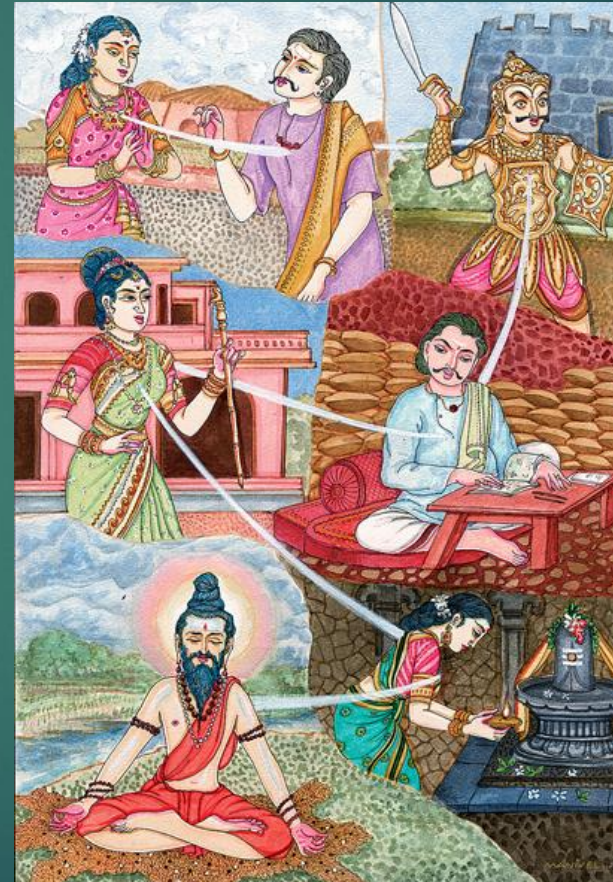
- ▶ In the Vedas, sentience is a result of all living things having Atman, which we could very loosely translate as 'soul' or 'self'
- ▶ This is not the personality of an individual, or their egoic sense of themselves
- ▶ It's the basic 'witness consciousness' that makes those things possible
- ▶ Atman is understood as related to Brahman, the ultimate principle of reality (though the various orthodox schools disagree about exactly how)

आत्मन्

Atman
Soul

Reincarnation

- ▶ Atman is timeless and eternal, unaffected by changing material conditions
- ▶ But according to Vedic philosophy, aspects of oneself are re-born or re-incarnated after your death in the cycle of samsara
- ▶ Based on the virtuous (or unvirtuous) actions one performs in life, the next birth may be fortunate or unfortunate
- ▶ And reincarnation into animals or plants is entirely possible



Moksha

- ▶ Liberation from the cycle of samsara is called moksha
- ▶ It is usually understood to be achieved by realizing sufficiently deep self-knowledge
- ▶ But a pre-requisite to that self-knowledge is living a virtuous life, without causing harm to other sentient beings



Ahimsa

- ▶ Ahimsa roughly translates to non-harm, or non-violence
- ▶ Himsa (violence) is understood to produce negative karmic consequences for the person committing it, hindering progress towards moksha
- ▶ Various schools differ in exactly what counts as ahimsa (e.g., what to say about self-defense)
- ▶ But the basic idea should be fairly intuitive – it's not harming sentient beings



Vegetarianism

- ▶ To return to the very first (crudely put) question of this course, Hindu philosophy generally says it's not ok to eat animals
- ▶ Killing and eating animals is generally considered himsa
- ▶ Older Vedic texts contain some mention of animal sacrifice, but it is generally regarded as a bad idea
- ▶ “Manusmṛti 5.53, for example, reads: The person who performs the horse sacrifice every single year for 100 years and the one who will not eat meat are equal, the result (phala) of the merit (punya) of these two is equal.” (Framarin p.27)



Instrumentalist Arguments

- ▶ Framarin (2014) critiques a few arguments that try to show that animal life is only of instrumental value in Hinduism
- ▶ The instrumental arguments all say: ahimsa towards animals is recommended only because it is an obstacle to moksha
- ▶ This is to deny the thing he tried to show in the main reading
- ▶ Let's look at just one of these, the Argument from Illusion



Argument from Illusion

(Framarin 2014, p. 24)

- ▶ Premise 1: Certain Hindu texts and traditions claim that everything other than the ātman is a product of māyā (a deluding force), and hence illusory.
- ▶ Premise 2: Anything that is illusory is devoid of intrinsic value.
- ▶ Conclusion 1/Premise 3: Hence certain Hindu texts and traditions entail that everything other than the ātman – including animals and plants – is devoid of intrinsic value.
- ▶ Premise 4: If certain Hindu texts and traditions entail that everything other than the ātman is devoid of intrinsic value, then they entail that everything other than the ātman – including animals and plants – is devoid of direct moral standing.
- ▶ Conclusion 2: Hence certain Hindu texts and traditions entail that everything other than the ātman – including animals and plants – is devoid of direct moral standing.

Response to the Argument from Illusion

- ▶ Framarin responds that if nothing except atman is intrinsically valuable, then it becomes absolutely arbitrary whether himsa or ahimsa are virtuous
- ▶ If animals and plants lack direct moral standing, why is ahimsa a good thing to practice in the first place?
- ▶ It is only if ahimsa is a good thing in and of itself that it makes sense to consider it a way of accumulating merit, and therefore a stepping stone to moksha



Interconnectedness Interpretations

- ▶ Framarin then goes on to consider a few different answers to the question: why do animals and plants have direct moral standing?
- ▶ The first type he looks at say: Hindu metaphysics say that all of nature is interconnected, and this underwrites the moral status of animals and plants
- ▶ He thinks this is not the correct interpretation however



Deutsch (1970)

- ▶ “[t]he first and perhaps most obvious core idea needed by us to establish and sustain a proper relation with physical nature is the idea that every-thing in nature is interconnected with everything else. This idea means that nature is so constituted that any action performed will have its effect over a wide, complex and oftentimes unforeseen terrain ... According to the doctrine of [karma] ... [w]hatever one does will have effects not only in the immediate present but in the long future as well: any act, in short, will have consequences that reach out far beyond the act itself.(Deutsch 1970: 80–81)” (Quoted in Framarin 2014, p. 42)

Interconnectedness Interpretations

- ▶ Framarin objects that this isn't really what the doctrine of karma says
- ▶ Karma is the idea that your past and present actions will have consequences for your current and future incarnations
- ▶ But that isn't to connect all living things into a web, it just connects you to yourself!
- ▶ The idea of re-birth means that you probably shouldn't eat animals, since you may one day be an animal yourself
- ▶ But that is a prudential reason for ahimsa, not an intrinsic one



Sameness Interpretations

- ▶ “Premise 1: Certain Hindu texts and traditions claim that individual, living, non-human entities in nature, such as animals and plants, are the same, in some sense, as brahman.
- ▶ Premise 2: Brahman has direct moral standing.
- ▶ Premise 3: If individual, living, non-human entities in nature are the same, in some sense, as brahman, and if brahman has direct moral standing, then individual entities in nature have direct moral standing.
- ▶ Conclusion: So certain Hindu texts and traditions claim that individual, living, non-human entities in nature, such as animals and plants, have direct moral standing.”
- ▶ (Framarin 2014, p. 63)

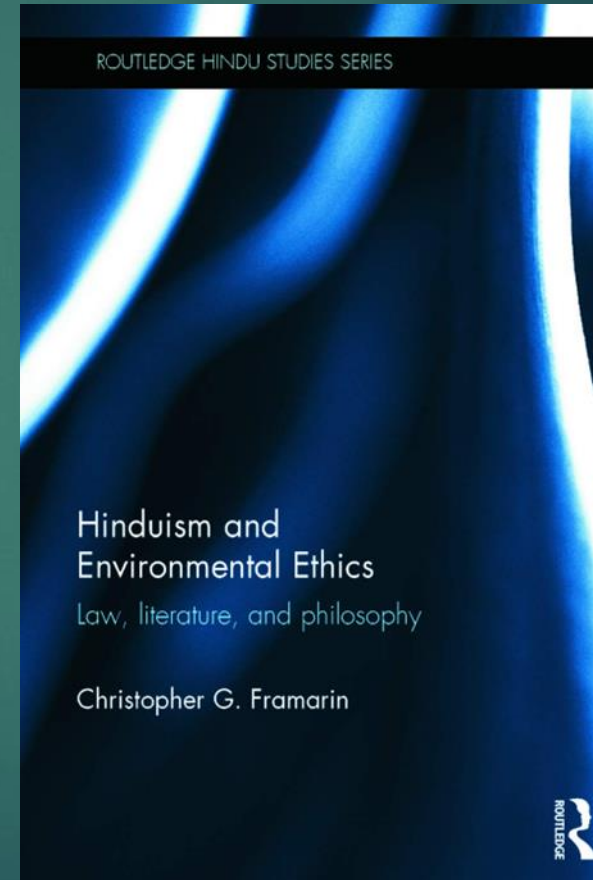
Sameness Interpretations

- ▶ But, Framarin objects, Brahman doesn't have 'moral standing' in anything like the way individual living things do
- ▶ Literally nothing we could possibly do can hurt or help Brahman
- ▶ Not even the individual atman is affected by material concerns
- ▶ "Weapons do not cut [the ātman], fire does not burn it, waters do not wet it, the wind does not desiccate it ... The body being killed, [the ātman] is not killed."
Bhagavadgita, quoted in Framarin 2014 p.68



So what is Framarin's answer?

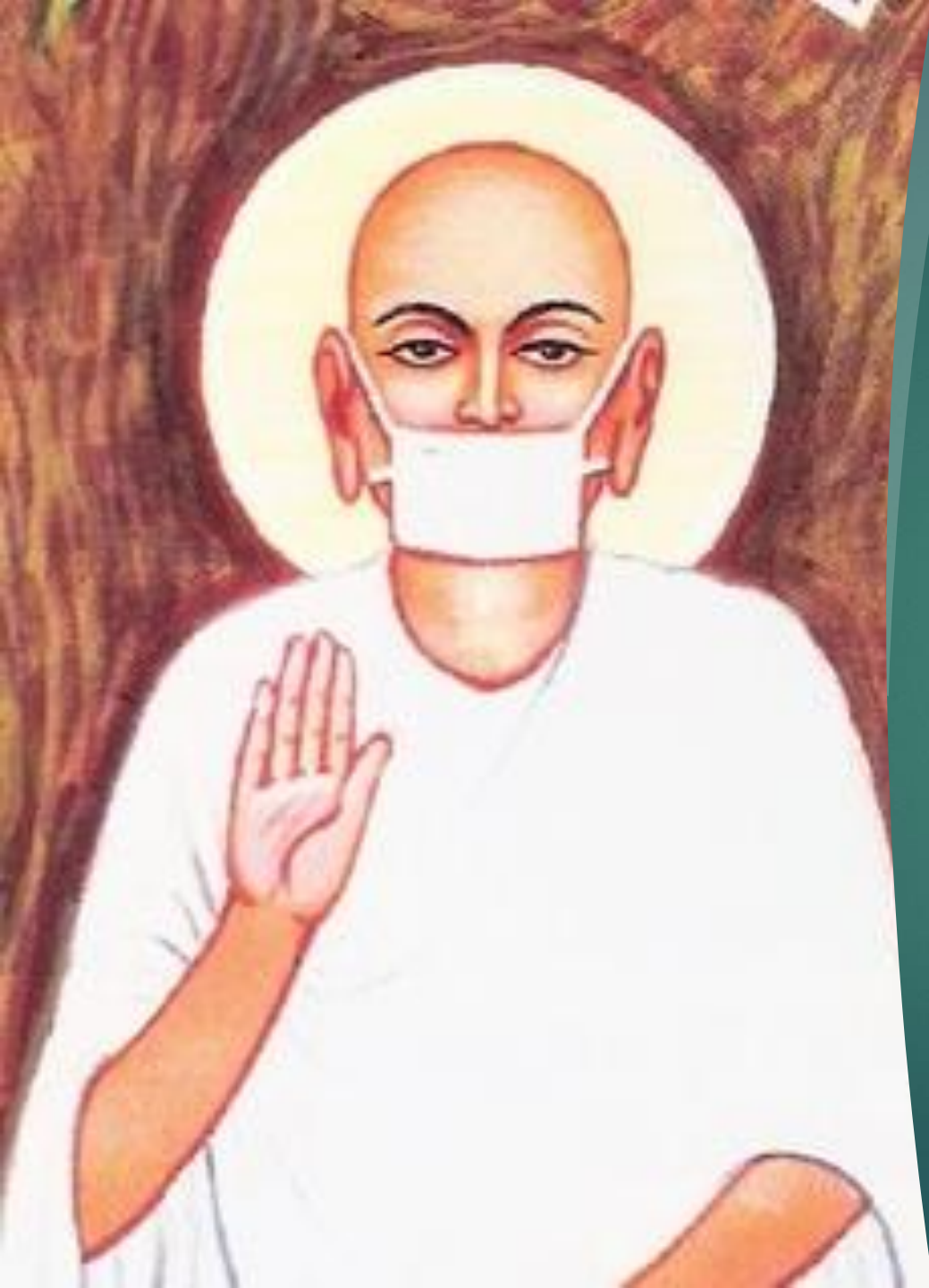
- ▶ So if Framarin rejects those accounts of why animals and plants have intrinsic moral standing in Hinduism, what is his answer?
- ▶ He doesn't explain at any great length in this book or the reading
- ▶ But I take his answer to amount to: because it's bad to harm sentient beings
- ▶ If that is correct, then it's the same basic reason a non-Hindu could give



Why is it ok to eat plants?

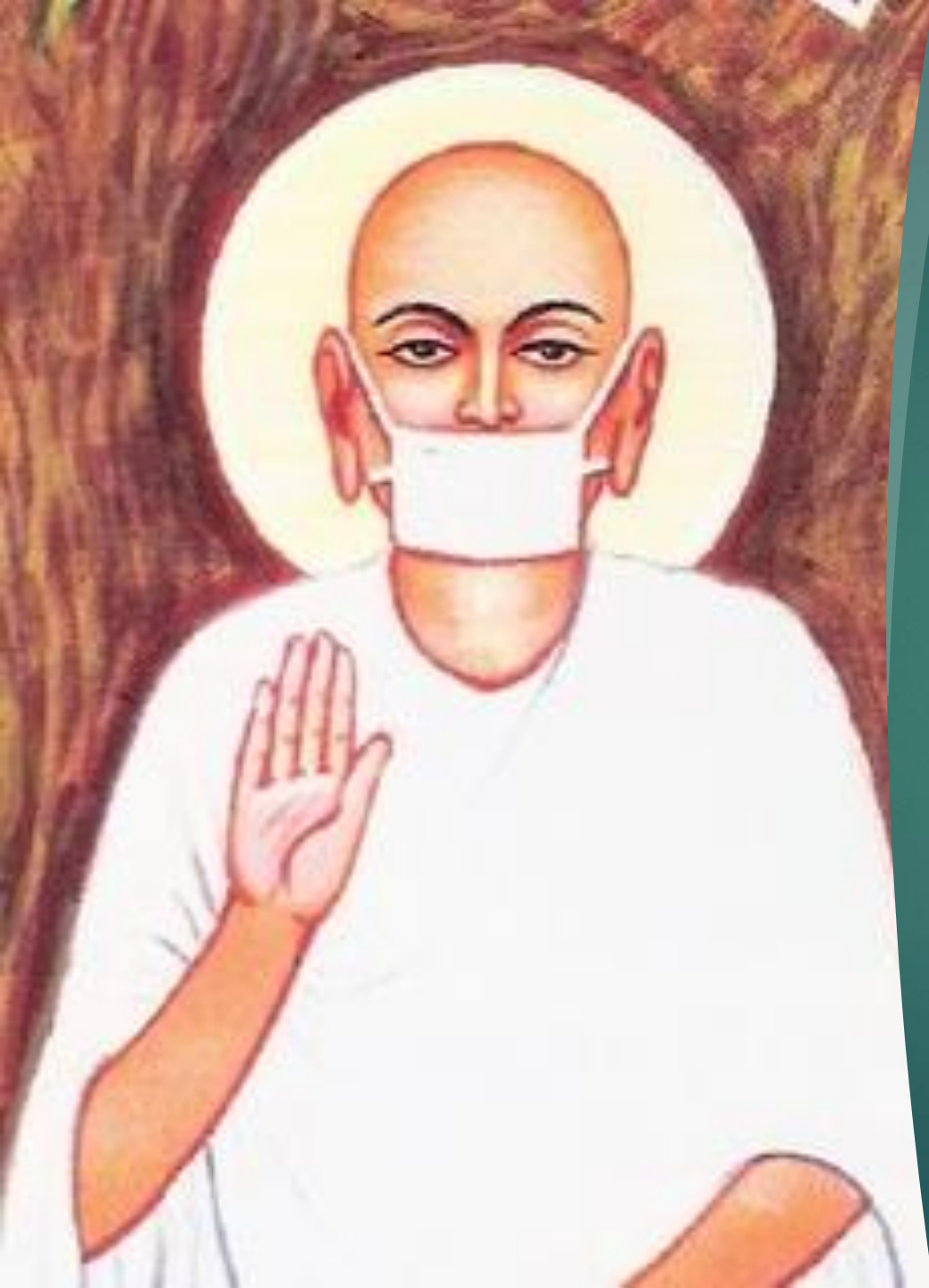
- ▶ I haven't found a definitive answer to this one
- ▶ One answer given is: it isn't ok! Taking any life is bad, but taking plant life isn't as bad
- ▶ Another is: plant based food that doesn't kill the plant (e.g. fallen fruit) should be preferred
- ▶ Another is: there is a divine sanction for humans to eat plants because we need them to live





Ahimsa in Jainism

- ▶ A heterodox school of Indian philosophy is Jainism with a quite specific answer to this question
- ▶ They rank living things by the number of senses they have
- ▶ E.g., plants have only the sense of touch and basic vital functions like growth, but humans have five senses
- ▶ So the amount of harm done by harvesting a plant is significantly less than by killing an animal for food



Ahimsa in Jainism

- ▶ A Jain monastic may wear a mask over their mouth to avoid accidentally swallowing a bug
- ▶ They regard even microorganisms as worthy of protection
- ▶ They regard the basic problem with violence as its being a manifestation of passion, which is a hinderance to moksha

Key Terms

- ▶ Environmental Ethics
- ▶ Ahimsa
- ▶ The Last Man Argument
- ▶ Sameness Interpretations
- ▶ Interconnection Interpretations



Next time:
Plant Intelligence