

Book Review: Identity as Reasoned Choice: A South Asian Perspective on the Reach and Resources of Public and Practical Reasoning in Shaping Individual Identities

by Blog Admin

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*In an increasingly multi-religious and multi-ethnic world, identity has become something actively chosen rather than merely acquired at birth. This book essentially analyzes the resources available to make such a choice. Looking into the world of intellectual India, **Emily Coolidge Toker** finds that this unique comparative survey focuses on the identity resources offered by India's traditions of reasoning and public debate. This groundbreaking work by **Jonardon Ganeri** builds on themes developed by Amartya Sen to provide a creative pursuit of Indian reasoning that will appeal to anyone studying politics, philosophy, and Asian political thought.*



Identity as Reasoned Choice: A South Asian Perspective on the Reach and Resources of Public and Practical Reasoning in Shaping Individual Identities. Jonardon Ganeri. Continuum. April 2012.

The principal argument presented in Ganeri's thorough and thoughtful book is that one's individual identity, as practiced both in public and private arenas, is developed through reason grounded in the relevant local normative tradition. Although one might contest that another philosophical tradition could conceivably be substituted, this is the first (really!) in-depth treatment of India's "argumentative" philosophical and religious traditions in a work of social and political theory. Ganeri's introduction and references provide a suitably scrupulous list of the works that will be vastly enriched by his contribution. A very clever promotional tool.

Incidentally, this is a book which Ganeri is uniquely positioned to write: a professor of philosophy at the [University of Sussex](#), he has been writing readable epistemology and theories of self anchored in classical and early modern India since before I could legally imbibe – which I suppose some might argue is an alternative path to enlightenment.

For anyone in need of a primer, the chief texts Ganeri uses are the Sanskrit epics [Mahabharata](#) and [Ramayana](#), both of which contain philosophical and devotional material nested within and throughout frame-tales of historical narratives and stories. The *Mahabharata* (an enormous text – for comparison, it's roughly ten times longer than Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined) includes the Hindu text *Bhagavad Gita*, as well as texts central to the Yogic and Vedantic philosophies. If you're interested in an introduction to the texts, I recommend [Epic Philosophy: an Introduction to the Mahabharata](#), by Vishwa Adluri or [The Great Epic of India: Character and Origin of the Mahabharata](#).

Unfortunately for corner-cutters the world over, a decent abridged version of the *Mahabharata* runs 900 pages; fortunately for the frugal, a full version is available free online. The *Ramayana* likewise presents in allegorical form the teachings of Hindu sages, but is more particularly concerned with ideal relationships, our duties to others, and the pursuit of *dharma* (natural law, natural order).

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Ganeri handily uses these texts and the traditions they embody to draw, for instance in the section discussed below, specific exemplary philosophical approaches to the self, its formation, nature, and place in the exceedingly tippy scales of the particular/universal. These discussions, though admittedly rooted in devotional philosophies, should – to the extent that they beautifully, delicately, portray subtle shifts between particularism and universalism “until a reflective equilibrium is reached” (p. 276) – be of interest not just to the mystic but also to contemporary political and social theorists.

So: with Ganeri’s two potentially disparate audiences in mind, the remainder of this review will focus on the spiritual and philosophical understandings of the self and my half-baked attempt to illustrate how these insights might be useful to theorists.

Part IV begins with a chapter detailing the choices available regarding “the temporal spread of one’s identity, about the role of emotions within it, and about the extent to which one sees one’s identity as something that transcends local affiliations” (p. 149-50). The primary metaphors in understanding the self are that of the sculptor who chisels away to uncover the sculpture already existing inside the stone (spiritual exercises as a restorative ‘return to the self’), that of the self as a painting or tapestry (spiritual exercises continuously generating or producing the self), and the *Simile of the Lute*, according to which the self cannot be located in any of the parts, or even in the whole, but only when the complete instrument is under the ministrations of a musician. These conceptualizations can be coupled with an understanding of the temporal nature of one’s identity as ephemeral and transitory (necessary for principles of non-attachment), as a complex oscillation between the past and present (simultaneously particular and universal), or as always-present (simultaneously complete and continuous). Together, these choices provide the foundation for an individual’s actions in public and private life. “Cognitive errors” at this stage are the root of “moral failings like falsehood, malice, deception, and greed” (p. 148).

With regard to the Epics’ approach to self and identity, Ganeri discusses the implications of reincarnation and the practice of non-attachment, whether and how to draw a distinction between a ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ self, the function of one’s conscience, and ultimately what it means to be ‘true to one’s individual self’. Reincarnation, citing Plotinus, can imply “that two *different* persons [...] share a common soul” (p. 152) but not necessarily that, say, different people are given custody of the same soul and can, by their actions, alter it in any meaningful way.

In understanding this, Ganeri distinguishes between the kinds of “psychological linkages” necessary for an individual to a reincarnation of an earlier person and the decidedly stronger ones “that hold within a single person.” It’s not like developing a fantastic stock portfolio and then having to hand it off to some irresponsible shmuck who plays fast and loose with your legacy or anything, although perhaps the beneficiary may not behave exactly as you would have.

When considering the distinction between ‘higher’ (universal/categorical: i.e. *Brahman*) and ‘lower’ (individual) selves, Ganeri presents us again with two metaphors: one in which the distinction between these selves can be understood as the difference between seeing a house as consisting of many different spaces (rooms) or as consisting of one space (house, rooms irrelevant), and one in which the moon is reflected in a pond, and the lower self, bound by a specific and singular perspective, may see its own version of an otherwise constant moon. In both metaphors, the ‘illusion’ of delineation remains, despite the acknowledgement of a ‘higher’ self. What should interest the social theorist here is the extent to which a sense of one’s individuality survives a ‘higher’ identification – the extent to which ‘illusions’ remain after acknowledgment of higher affiliation.

Laudable both for its academic and philosophical rigor and the extent to which the traditions discussed in this book are deeply in play among individuals and groups interested in Eastern spirituality, I should hope that Ganeri is suitably commended for successfully meeting the criteria of both sets of readers – though I can’t imagine how pleased the reader in the centre of this particular Venn diagram might be.

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