

The Carvaka Philosophy

The Carvaka (sweet-talkers), also known as Lokayata philosophy, is a heterodox Hindu philosophy named after its founder and often classified with its fellow dissenter philosophies of Buddhism and Jainism. However, unlike Jainism and Buddhism, Carvaka has not turned into its own religious sect and remains a philosophical ideal. Being a heterodox school of thought means that Carvaka rejects the idea that the Vedas are revealed texts (*sruti*) and also rejects the power of the *Brahmin* priestly class (see King 19). It is a materialistic philosophy that places most of its emphasis on the here and now and life as we perceive it as we live through it. The Carvaka system only accepts perceived knowledge to be true and therefore dismisses the concept of an afterlife. Although the philosophy is believed to be quite old, there are very few texts that deal directly with the system itself.

There is no single piece of extant literature that is solely based on the materialistic philosophy of the Carvaka. The few writings that clearly relate to the system are not very old in Hindu terms (a few centuries) but many scholars believe that there is evidence of criticisms of the Carvaka principles in earlier writings by adversary philosophers such as Sankara (Hiriyanna 187). The Carvakas played a significant role in the history of Indian philosophy (King 21). It was very unnerving to the leaders and priests of the orthodox tradition because of the rejection of their sacred texts and the rejection of immaterial forms of existence. The importance of the materialist philosophy is most likely underplayed because of the lack of extant texts of Carvaka or Lokayata itself. The *Brhaspati Sutra* apparently set out the principles of the system but the text has been lost. The orthodox opposition wrote the only known writings pertaining to the philosophy. The only possible extant writing on the Caravaka philosophy is *Destruction of Philosophical Theories (Tattvopaplavasimha)* by Jayarasi Bhatta (King 19). Even this is not

directly Carvaka; it is explained more as radical skepticism than materialism. Still the fact that Jayarasi was from a school of skeptical Lokayatikas gives writings that are closely related to and are not completely critical of the Carvaka philosophy.

The lack of texts to support it made the tradition unlikely to survive, unlike its fellow heterodox traditions of Buddhism and Jainism adhering to their own sacred texts. The only possible extant writing on the Carvaka philosophy is *Destruction of Philosophical Theories (Tattvopaplavasimha)* by Jayarasi Bhatta (King 19). Even this is not directly Carvaka; it is explained more as radical skepticism than materialism. Still the fact that Jayarasi was from a school of skeptical Lokayatikas gives writings that are closely related to and are not completely critical of the Carvaka philosophy. There is also evidence of the Carvaka system in the *Rgveda*. The poets of the *Rgveda* never show a desire to reach another world but instead put emphasis on the here and now facts of life, just as the Carvaka system does (Raja 24). The philosophy receives much ridicule in ancient literature. This is presumed to be because of the gaps and deficiencies in the system of thought itself because fellow heterodox systems that reject the Vedas and authority of the priestly class do not receive such negative commentary. Since most of the writings on the Carvaka are by followers of opposing schools of thought, it may be misinterpreted and its weaknesses overly emphasized.

One of the reasons that many philosophers reject Carvaka is because of the dogma of perception. The doctrine states that the only valid knowledge (*pranama*) is that which is directly perceived-- sense knowledge. Reasoning is completely rejected as a valid way of acquiring knowledge (King 132). The explanation for this is that there is not sufficient cause for believing in the truth of the inductive relation that forms the basis for the idea. The inductive relation can be different to each individual and is not physically apparent. It takes on the approach of modern

science (Raja 30). Universal relationships can be accepted only if they can be warranted by direct observation (*anubhava*), much like a science experiment. Inference requires perceptual knowledge to establish its validity. Giving probabilities rather than definitive answers was the main reason for resistance to inferential reasoning (King 133). The limitations on thought and reasoning provide a rigid barrier to giving deeper meaning to life and thereby contribute any new ideas or perspectives to Indian philosophy (*darshanas*).

In ancient Hindu society the upper three *varnas* were allowed to participate in Vedic ritual practices and receive an education. The lack of inclusiveness of commoners may have provided a base for their support of Carvaka. Not being allowed to participate in Vedic rituals and having the powerful priestly class causing dissent made the philosophy's position of rejection of the Vedas and Brahmins very appealing (King 17). It is easy to reject the power of the Vedic text when one is not allowed to participate in rituals or is unable to read them.

The specific purposes of human existence are undecided from the Carvaka philosophical viewpoint. In traditional Hindu society righteousness (*dharma*), pleasure (*kama*), worldly success (*artha*), and liberation (*moksa*) were the basic principles of human existence. The materialists believed that the main goal of life was *kama* or the pursuit of pleasure (King 18). A follower of the doctrine would try to maximize the pleasures in his or her life. The Carvaka promotes a lifestyle based on the avoidance of sorrow or suffering. Some scholars also believe that success or wealth (*artha*) was another main goal of the Carvaka life. The philosophy is often criticized because of these materialistic purposes for life. In later writings distinctions seem to have been made between refined materialism, which had a hierarchical scheme of pleasures, and approving of intellectual over sensual pleasure, and a more crude materialism (King 18). The hierarchal system is probably a more valid description of how the original

philosophy was practiced, with intellect being important and adherents not having blatant disregard for the moral issues that go along with the attempt to have *artha* and *kama*.

Lokayata often has a negative reputation because of the lack of *dharma* as an absolute goal of life. The philosophy cannot just be projected as an unreflective hedonistic perspective. Dealing with moral issues and rejecting the actions that may cause harm to others has evidentiary support (King 19). Since there was a lack of the goal of righteousness derived from *dharma*, the idea of *kama* controlled actions of the followers. *Kama* was not believed to be for just oneself, but a universal goal to avoid suffering for oneself and others. Carvaka also condemned war and the Vedic animal sacrifices much like the Jainas and Buddhists (Chattopadhyaya 31). Both of these practices add to the suffering of other individuals, making them unacceptable to the Lokayata.

The doctrine dismisses all gods, *devas* and supernatural beings (Hiriyanna 193). It is also recognized that there is no god who governs the universe, no life after death, or conscience (*dharma*). The material world is all that exists and there are no other worlds in which to be reborn. This fixates a follower totally on the world of sense around them and does not inspire elevated thoughts of a deeper reality. There is no god who created the world, but a conglomeration of matter that is able to produce things out of itself (Dasgupta 175). Carvaka rejects the idea of Brahman because nobody has come back to relate to us what happens after death. Brahman is inferred, and cannot be perceived by the senses. Therefore the Carvaka rejects Brahman. Only the four elements of earth, fire, water and air are recognized and these together produce intelligence that is destroyed when the body perishes. Just like intelligence, *atman* or the soul is not believed to be a separate entity from the body as it is unable to be demonstrated that it does exist.

Although there are no remaining practitioners of the Carvaka philosophy it still remains an integral part of Indian philosophical history. There may be resurgence in the interest and study of such materialistic philosophies such as this with the changing views of western culture today.

References and Further Recommended Readings

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<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caravaka>

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/topic-97591/Carvaka>

http://india_resource.tripod.com/scienceh.htm

http://www.orientalia.org/dictionary-Indian_Philosophy-definition22329-Carvaka+or+Lokayata.html

<http://www.humanistictexts.org/carvaka.htm>

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