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Formerly "Picture of the Month"

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The Rational, the Moral, and the General: An Exploration

Part 4: Ideas in Ancient Indian Thought / Introduction



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An "Eastern" perspective: three ancient Indian ideas In Part 3 of this exploration we considered the character of general ideas of reason as ideal limiting concepts and hence, the need for finding ways to "approximate" their intent and to unfold their meaning in real-world contexts of practice. We also considered the eternal tension of the particular (or contextual) and the general (or universal) in the quest for such meaning clarification and described two basic "critical movements of thought" involved, a contextualizing and a decontextualizing movement. We concluded that the notion of a cycle of critical contextualization (or "critically contextualist cycle") might provide an elementary heuristic for reflective and discursive processes of "approximation."

In view of the fundamental nature of these two movements of thought, it is to be expected that they can be found under varying names in many different traditions of human thought and will be employed in conjunction with many different types of "general ideas." I therefore suggest we try and complement the "Western," basically Kantian perspective that we have adopted thus far with an entirely different perspective, drawn from an "Eastern" tradition of thought. I have selected to this end the Hindu (or Vedic) tradition of ancient Indian philosophy as it is represented by the *Vedanta* scriptures and among these particularly by the *Upanishads*. My hope is that they can throw a new or additional spotlight on the emerging notion of critical contextualism.

Sources To many of my readers, the tradition of thought we are about to explore is likely to represent rather unfamiliar territory, just as for myself. They may appreciate to have a list of some basic sources that I have found useful. I can recommend them to those readers who, beyond reading what follows, would like to see for themselves and to study this tradition of thought in more detail. The list (see Box) will be followed by an introduction to the world of the Vedanta as I have come to understand it based on these sources, along with some additional sources referenced in the text. Thus

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Note: This is the forth of the essays on the role of general ideas in rational thought and action. With it we begin an excursion into the world of ideas of ancient India, as represented by the Vedic tradition of thought and esp. the *Upanishads*. The present essay offers an introduction, to be continued in the next essay with an analysis of three of their essential ideas.

prepared, we will then turn to an examination of three essential ideas of Upanishadic thought that I have selected for discussion.

BOX: RECOMMENDED BASIC SOURCES

Introductory texts on ancient Indian thought: As a first introduction to ancient Indian thought that is available in open-access mode, I recommend the very substantial and informative entry on "[Hinduism](#)" of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2013c, also compare 2013a and b), an encyclopedia entry that includes no less than 59 web pages. Not quite as substantial but still useful for a first approach are the Wikipedia entries on "[Hinduism](#)," the "[Vedas](#)," and the "[Upanishads](#)," along with many more specific entries to which I will provide links where they are relevant. Short entries on Hindu philosophy in general and on the teachings of the *Vedas*, *Vedanta*, and *Upanishads* in particular can also be found in many standard philosophical dictionaries. A concise introductory text on Indian philosophy in general, for those interested in the larger picture, is Hamilton (2001); however, the Upanishads are not given a central part in this account. For the purpose of the present essay more useful are the two short but inspiring introductions by Navlakha (2000) and Easwaran (2007) to their respective translations of the Upanishads (cited below). For further study, the pioneering accounts of Monier-Williams (1877; 1891), an early outstanding scholar of ancient Indian thought and also the renowned author of an influential Sanskrit dictionary (see below), continue to be rich and insightful sources, although their language is now somewhat outdated and at times may strike contemporary readers as being "politically incorrect" (an observation that should not distract attention from the scholarly merits of Monier-Williams' work).

English translations of the Upanishads: Probably still the most authoritative, because scholarly and faithful, translation is Müller's (1879 and 1884). It is the translation on which I have relied primarily for checking my understanding, along with Navlakha's contemporary revision of that early translation (see Müller and Navlakha, 2000). Easier and elegant reading is offered by Easwaran's (2007) translation; it is the one I have mostly used where I quote some literal passages from the Upanishads, although occasionally in slightly edited form (made transparent as such) as inspired by Müller and Navlakha. On a few occasions where Müller/Navlakha and Easwaran diverge particularly strongly, I have also consulted Nikhilananda's (1949, 1952; 2003) and Olivelle's (1996) translations as neutral third sources, as it were.

Introductory commentaries on the Upanishads: Early and still authoritative sources (now in the public domain) are Müller's (1879 and 1884) Preface and Introductions to his two-volume translation of what he calls the eleven "principal" or "classical" Upanishads (1884, p. ix). I found them an excellent place to begin my reading, along with the translation itself. In addition, Müller's (1904/2013) three lectures on the Vedanta are still very readable. Nikhilananda's (1949, 1952, 2003) commentaries are equally a relevant source. Particularly in the section on the Isha Upanishad, I have found it informative to consult his (1949, pp. 194-199) account, as it includes a literal extract from the famous commentary of Adi Shankara (also known as Sankara or Shankaracharya), a major early Vedanta philosopher and mystic who probably lived from 788 to 820 CE and whose writings were seminal in reviving interest in the then almost forgotten Upanishads. Among the many contemporary introductory commentaries, I found the introductory essay of Nagler (2007) particularly well

written and informative, and that of Easwaran (2007) particularly engaging. As already mentioned, Navlakha's (2000) revision of Müller's translation comes with an introduction of its own, a source that I equally found very readable and useful. Nikhilananda's (1949, 1952, 2003) and Olivelle's (1996) translations, too, come with extensive introductions of their own. Readers looking for a broader scholarly overview and critical account of all major traditions of Indian thought, including the Upanishads, may want to consult Sharma (2000). Likewise, Ganeri (2001) offers a comprehensive and demanding scholarly analysis of Indian philosophy with a focus on its rational rather than mystic side (a focus it shares with my own interest), which however reaches far beyond the limitations of the present essay. Some further sources on which I have relied will be indicated in the contexts where I draw on them.

Sanskrit dictionaries and on-line translation tools: I have relied mainly on the *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* of Monier-Williams (1899 and less frequently 1872; as a searchable online tool, see also the HTML version by Monier-Williams et al., 2008, also accessible via Cologne Project, 1997/2008). Other dictionaries that I have used are Apte's (1890/2014 and 1965/2008) and Macdonnel's (1929) *Practical Sanskrit Dictionaries*, both of which also come in online versions that allow direct entering of either Roman or Devanagari script; the latter option helps avoid frequent transliteration problems. In addition, the two Böthlink dictionaries, the *Greater* and the *Smaller Petersburg Sanskrit-German Dictionaries* (Böthlingk and Roth, 1855, and Böthlingk and Schmidt, 1879/1928), occasionally also proved useful. Finally, on some occasions I consulted the earliest of all Sanskrit dictionaries (Wilson, 1819/2011) as well as the *Apte English-Sanskrit Dictionary* (Apte, 1920/2007), the latter allowing me to check my understanding by means of reverse translation of terms. As a last hint, searchable, digitized versions of all these dictionaries are now accessible through Cologne (2013/14).

Transliteration tools: For occasionally converting Roman letters into the Devanagari letters used by Sanskrit texts, or vice-versa, as well as for looking up contemporary meanings of Sanskrit words, the *SpokenSanskrit* site (n.d.) and the *Tamilcube English to Sanskrit Converter Tool* (n.d.) are useful tools; along with the already mentioned HTML version of the *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* by Monier-Williams et al. (2008), which also offers a transliteration function (choose "Devanagari Unicode" as output or input).

Introduction to the Upanishads "Upanishad" means as much as "secret teaching," or literally also "sitting nearby devotedly," suggesting the notion of students listening to the teachings of a spiritual master. The *Upanishads* belong to the *Vedas*, the oldest collection of ancient Sanskrit scriptures or *shruti* (also written *sruti*), that is, "revealed" or "heard" texts that traditionally were not considered to be of human authorship; they were passed down in oral tradition already thousands of years ago before being written down. They count among the oldest known texts in any Indo-European language and of humanity in general. They also represent the main spiritual and theoretical basis of Hindu religion and philosophy.

"Veda" comes from the Sanskrit verb *vid*, which means as much as to "know" or "see" (cf. the German verb *wissen* and the Latin verb *videre*, or also the Middle-English noun *wit*). The development of the Vedas began with the *Samhitas*, hymns and prayers to the Vedic gods in the form of verses (or mantras) that offer revelations about the cosmic and divine reality that lies behind human existence and governs it. There are four collections of Samhitas – the Rig Samhitas, the Yajur Samhitas, the Sam Samhitas, and the Atharva Samhitas – and accordingly there are also four collections of Vedas, the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sam Veda, and the Atharva Veda (a distinction that will not matter to us in the following, so I will mostly refer to "the Vedas" in general). In addition to the Samhitas, each of these four Vedas consists of three more categories of scriptures. The *Brahmanas* first developed as a kind of liturgical manuals, written in prose rather than verses, which were appended to each of the four Samhitas, discussing their meaning and describing rigorous rules and rituals for religious practices such as worship, offerings, sacrifice, and purification. Subsequently, the *Aranyakas* and the *Upanishads* were added as commentaries on the Brahmanas, explaining and inviting contemplation of their mystic and religious contents (in the Aranyakas) and later also of their metaphysical, spiritual and philosophical contents (in the Upanishads). Thus it comes that each of the four Vedas is made up of the four mentioned strands of shruti: the Samhitas (hymns or mantras), the Brahmanas (rules and rituals), the Aranyakas (religious contemplations), and the Upanishads (metaphysical contemplations).¹⁵⁾

In Western terms we might think of the Samhitas, Brahmanas, and Aranyakas as *liturgy*, that is, texts that can be cited in religious service and also provide guidelines and rituals for it. The underlying *world view*, briefly summarized, is that there are two levels of order in the universe, the visible and changing (i.e., phenomenal) reality in which we live and the cosmic and unchanging (i.e., transcendent) reality that lies beyond what we can perceive. In epistemological rather than metaphysical terms, we might speak today of first-order knowledge (the cognitive level of each individual's awareness of the world and of itself) and second-order knowledge (the cognitive level at which we conceive of universal and unchanging ideas and principles). A state of perfect *dharma* ("order, law") exists when the two levels of order – the individual micro-cosmos and the cosmic macro-cosmos – are in harmony

(cf. Hamilton, 2001, p. 64f). The usual state, however, is *a-dharma*, "disorder," which can only be overcome with the help of the Vedic gods. The sacrificial rituals of the Veda are to make sure the gods intervene to this end and reestablish the cosmic order, or maintain it in the first place. This explains why particularly the *Brahmanas* focus on sacrificial rituals and other instructions for living up to one's individual dharma (*svadharma*, "one's own law"), as the assumed only way to live according to the cosmic order (*sanatana dharma*, "the eternal law") and thus to help maintain it.

Apart from that metaphysical conception, little philosophical thought (and none in the sense of active philosophical inquiry and reflection) is to be found in the *Brahmanas*. They are, philosophically speaking, dogmatic texts. Only with the *Aranyakas* (from *aranya* = "wilderness" or forest, thus "wilderness texts" or "forest scriptures"), things begin to change. They can be said to mark the transition from a mainly ritualistic to a more philosophical orientation of Vedic thought. As their name suggests, they offer mystic interpretations of the brahmanic rituals (especially the sacrifices) that were to be contemplated in the calm and solitude of the wilderness or forests. This new reflective stance leads on to the *Upanishads*, the most intensely spiritual and philosophical expression of Vedic thought (cf. Sharma, 2000, p. 14).

With the *Upanishads*, things change indeed. They represent the first and probably also the most important source of the *Vedanta*, the late-Vedic texts that embody the more intellectual and scholarly part of the Vedic tradition. It is worth mentioning that although the name "Vedanta" (literally = "Veda-end") is now commonly taken to refer to the temporal end (i.e., the concluding parts) of the Veda, it originally referred to the object or *highest purpose* rather than just to the last portions of the Veda (see Müller, 1884, p. lxxxvi, note 1). The two other major Vedanta texts are the *Bhagavadgita* (also simply called the *Gita*) and the *Brahma Sutras* (also called *Vedanta Sutras*; *sutra* = aphorism). Together, these three Vedanta scriptures are now customarily considered the foundational texts of orthodox ancient Hindu philosophy, an ill-defined concept that is understood here to refer to the Vedic tradition (including the Vedantic tradition) of Indian philosophy rather than to Indian philosophy as a whole.¹⁶⁾

While the first three strands of the Vedas (the *Samhitas*, *Brahmanas*, and

Aranyakas) can be dated back to about 1,500 to 1,000 BCE (e.g., Monier-Williams, 1891, p. 7) or perhaps in the main to 1,500 to 1,200 BCE (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013c, subsection "Veda"), that is, to the late **Bronze Age** and the early **Iron Age of India**, the dating of the Upanishads and other Vedanta texts stretches over a larger period of time and is less certain. Some ten Upanishads are now generally considered to count as the principal Upanishads (*mukhya upanishads*) and these are also the earliest ones, although a number of authors count a few texts more. For example, the 8th/9th century mystic and philosopher **Shankara** (cited in Müller, 1884, p. ix) counts eleven, as do Nikhilananda (2003) and Sharma (2000); Prabhavananda and Manchester (1984) and Olivelle (1996) count twelve; and Hume (1996) and Müller and Navlakha (2000) count thirteen. These "primary" Upanishads (primary in terms of both time of origin and importance) can be dated approximately between 900 and 500 BCE.¹⁷⁾ In subsequent centuries, over 100 more texts were composed that understood themselves as Upanishads. As newer texts have continued to be discovered, there is no definitive list and thus also no definitive dating. As to the other late-Vedic or Vedanta scriptures, the *Gita* dates between the 5th and 2nd centuries BCE and the *Sutras* probably originate in the first few centuries CE.

The dawn of philosophical reflection: the discovery of the knowing subject

The Vedanta and particularly the Upanishads are considered mankind's oldest known philosophical texts. Like the earlier Veda scriptures, they often come in the forms of aphorisms, hymns, and poetry and use metaphors along with narratives and dialogues as didactic means; characteristic of the latter are teacher-student dialogues. Unlike the earlier Veda scriptures, however, their aim is no longer mainly to offer liturgy and instruction for religious practice, so as to win the favor of the cosmic and divine powers that control the human destiny. The essential new idea is that the power to control and change man's destiny resides not just in the gods, whose favors need to be gained through sacrifice and worship, but also in man himself, in the ability to train and expand one's individual consciousness. Rather than worshipping the gods through rituals and sacrifice, it now becomes important to know and discover one's inner reality, so as to expand one's awareness of oneself and ultimately, to achieve spiritual autonomy rather than devotion to gods. Accordingly, the earlier focus on speculation about what lies beyond the

phenomenal reality around us gives way to a new focus on discovering man's inner self, the spiritual and intellectual reality within. The Vedanta scriptures can thus be understood as an inquiry into human capabilities and ways to develop it. As Ganeri (2007, pp. 117, 125 and passim) puts it, their aim is both philosophical and *protreptic* (i.e., instructive or educational).¹⁸⁾

Notably in the Upanishads, developing one's capabilities and self-understanding become all-important demands. They can be met through both philosophical study (ideally with a teacher) and spiritual practice (ideally with some mystical experience leading to a higher state of consciousness). The major aim now is to encourage an *inquiring mind*, along with a dedication to meditation, self-reflection, and self-discipline as sources of orientation for the right way to live. The idea is that one can find one's individual path of self-realization through *right thought and conduct* according to one's inner nature and place in the social order (the earlier-mentioned *svadharma*). "Right thought" includes awareness of the extent to which this path often fails to live up to the principles of the all-encompassing cosmic order (*sanatana dharma*). There is a normal tension between these two levels (or sources) of order in the world, one's individual and the cosmic dharma, of which "right thought and conduct" must not lose sight. In terms more familiar to the readers of my essays, the tension confronts us with a challenge to reason that is both intellectual (right thought) and moral (right conduct), whereby the two modes (and subjects) of reflection are closely interdependent. Such reflective efforts and conforming conduct are now, for the first time in the history of ancient Indian thought, understood to replace at least partly the brahmanic rituals, sacrifices, and other traditional efforts to improve one's *karma*, the record and future consequences of one's good deeds, thought of as causes of one's fate (from the Sanskrit noun *karman*, for work, action, performance). They can lead to eventual liberation (*moksha*) from the perpetual cycle of rebirth and transmigration of souls (*samsara*). Knowledge, not work, is the true liberating power. Ignorance, by contrast, is the origin of evil.

"Higher knowledge" Despite their poetic language and partly mystical character, the Upanishads thus place a previously unseen emphasis on learning and *acquisition of knowledge* (*prama*), rather than mere observance of rules and rituals, as the sources of right thought and conduct. As the

Mundaka Upanishad puts it, with explicit reference to the two levels of order and related knowledge to which we have referred above in terms of first- and second-order knowledge:

Knowledge is twofold, higher and lower.
The study of the Vedas, linguistics,
rituals, astronomy, and all the arts
can be called lower knowledge. The higher
is that which leads to Self-realization.
[...]
The rituals and the sacrifices described
in the Vedas deal with lower knowledge.
The sages ignored these rituals
and went in search of higher knowledge.

(Mundaka, 1.1.4-5 and 1.2.1, as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, pp. 185-187)

We may understand “higher knowledge” as referring to the traditional Vedic notion of a universe that lies beyond the visible world and about which we cannot know through experience, as well as to the new Upanishadic notion of second-order knowledge in the sense of *knowledge about knowledge*, its sources and nature and limits, which includes knowledge about the *knower* – “the higher [knowledge] which leads to Self-realization.”

There is a tacit criticism here of the older Vedic texts, if not outright rebellion against them. The Upanishadic mind no longer contents itself with a metaphysical focus that comes at the expense of epistemological clarity, nor with an unquestioned reliance on the power of rules and rituals that ignores the power of systematic inquiry and truth. The new and liberating motto is that spiritual and religious merit comes from the effort and discipline of *studying* the nature of the world and man's relationship with it, rather than just from ritual practice, by asking question such as these:

- What can we know about this world we live in? (*first-order knowledge*)
- How can we achieve such knowledge systematically (*second-order knowledge, epistemological*)?
- What may we hope to learn about that other realm of reality behind and beyond the visible world, what principles govern it and also manifest themselves in this world of ours and in our lives? (*second-order knowledge, metaphysical*)
- How do we live properly? (*first-order knowledge, practical*)
- How should we think properly about practical concerns and needs, and about adequate ways to handle them? (*second-order knowledge, practical*)
- And finally, how may we hope to grow as individuals, so as to develop reflective practices of inquiry and action and gain deeper awareness with regard to all the previous points? (*second-order knowledge, spiritual*,

intellectual, and professional)

(Questions inspired through exchange with D.P. Dash, 2014)

"Active search for truth" In sum, how can we orient ourselves in this world and think and act properly, if not on the basis of well-understood, and reflectively practiced, principles of inquiry and action that would reach beyond the surface of mere appearance and habit? And hence, how may we hope to acquire such higher understanding, except by an *active search for truth* and by cultivating our skills and attitudes accordingly? Or, as the Mundaka Upanishad continues the lines cited above in powerfully simple words:

Truth is victorious, never untruth.
Truth is the way; truth is the goal of life.
Reached by sages who are free from self-will.

(Mundaka, 3.1.6, as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, p. 193)

How truly revolutionary these words must have been in their time, comparable perhaps in our own epoch with the revolutionary force of Mahatma Gandhi's (1957) quest for *active nonviolence (ahimsa) grounded in the power of truth*, to which the title of his autobiography significantly refers as a succession of *Experiments of Truth*. As the experiment showed, truth still unfolds revolutionary and emancipator power in our "modern" epoch. The "attitude of experimenting, of testing what will and will not bear close scrutiny, what can and cannot be adapted to new circumstances" (Bok, 1993, p. xvi) is of timeless merit and virtue; but first in the history of human thought we find it formulated in the Upanishads.

In recognition of this insight, and surely also in deference to Mahatma Gandhi, the first line of the Mundaka's above-quoted verse was chosen as the Sanskrit motto of the modern Indian nation-state: *satyam eva jayate, nanritam*, "truth alone prevails, not untruth or falsehood." Its first part, written in Devanagari letters, is also inscribed at the base of India's national emblem, as well as on one side of all Indian currency: *satyameva jayate*, "truth alone prevails."



सत्यमेव जयते
India's national emblem:
'Truth alone prevails'

Good deeds, good practice The remarkable shift of focus that the Upanishads brought to ancient Indian spirituality had

significant consequences for what could count as good practice. For the first time, proper practice and adequate knowledge became closely interdependent, in that the quality of each now depended on the other. Not only was the search for true knowledge and understanding now appreciated as the highest source of right thought and action, but good practice was equally understood to be a valuable source of knowledge itself. The insight is as relevant today as it was then: practice is a form of inquiry, just as inquiry is a kind of practice.

The Vedic demand for doing good deeds remained valid, but the nature of good deeds had changed. Knowledge and understanding are a better basis for them than just ritual exercise (e.g., a ritual sacrifice). What is more, not only the search for knowledge matters but also the inner attitude or "spirit" with which it is conducted. As the Mundaka Upanishad puts it in the above-quoted verse 3.1.6, inquiry should be a *practice "free from self-will."* In today's terms we might think, for example, of a professional practice that engages with multiple stakeholders rather than just pursuing its own (possibly even undisclosed) agenda. So both the quest for knowledge and the attitude that guide it matter for the value and power of a "good deed."

It is clear, then, that the traditional brahmanic rituals could no longer meet the standards of Upanishadic reflection. As we read in the *Chandogya Upanishad*:

The act done with knowledge, with inner awareness and faith, grows in power.
(Chandogya, 1.1.10, as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, p. 125)

Again, what a powerful and perennially "modern" thought! And what a modern consequence the Upanishadic sages drew from it: along with the search for insight into the nature of cosmic reality and the meaning of human existence in it, the *search for ways to obtain such knowledge* had to become a primary focus of study. Are there reliable modes and methods of inquiry (*pramanas*, "sources of knowledge")? Perhaps for the first time in the history of mankind, the *knowing subject* emerges as an object of systematic inquiry and (self-) reflection. This explains why the Upanishads continue to be of philosophical interest to date: they combine mankind's age-old metaphysical interest in "ultimate" reality with a newly emerging *epistemological*, as well as logical and psychological, interest in modes of thought and inquiry that would be conducive to gaining knowledge and, based on it, to living

properly. Upanishadic epistemology is *pramana-sastra*, the theory or study of the pramanas or of how knowledge arises (e.g., Phillips, 2011, p. 1; 2012, p. 17). We will return to this subject a little later; suffice it here to point out that *pramana-sastra* is once again a type of second-order knowledge.

Unity in diversity: the metaphysics of "this" and "that" There is a second major shift of focus that the Upanishads brought to ancient Indian thought and which has been of lasting importance to this date. In the Upanishads emerges, probably equally for the first time in the history of human thought, the remarkably modern teaching that the world is an expression of cosmic forces and principles – and ultimately, a single principle – that exist independently of a personified creator or, as in the earlier Vedas, of a multitude of more or less important and more or less regional deities and demons. Rather, the cosmic principle embodies an impersonal, *pantheistic* source of power, of consciousness, and of intelligence. As the early scholar of ancient Indian philosophy, R.E. Hume, was writing in 1921:

If there is any one intellectual tenet which, explicitly or implicitly, is held by the people of India, furnishing a fundamental presupposition of all their thinking, it is this doctrine of pantheism. The beginnings of this all-pervading form of theorizing are recorded in the Upanishads. In these ancient documents are found the earliest serious attempts at construing the world of experience as a rational whole. (Hume, 1996, p. 1f)

From a contemporary Western perspective one might be inclined to dismiss such achievements as "just metaphysics"; but that would mean to miss the point. The point, methodologically speaking, is not to avoid metaphysical assumptions but to be aware of them and to handle them carefully. As the English novelist and poet Aldous Huxley, who thought highly of the Vedanta and also wrote about them, said quite accurately: "The choice is not between metaphysic and no metaphysic; it is always between a good metaphysic and a bad metaphysic." (Sharma, 2000, p. 13). Or, perhaps more in line with the spirit of this series of essays, it is between reflected and unreflected metaphysics – which is to say, what matters primarily is not what metaphysics we have but how we handle them epistemologically. Metaphysical ideas *can* be a source of valuable orientation, so long as we are aware of the role they play in our thought and conduct.

Related to the pantheistic turn of the Upanishads is another metaphysical idea that was to become an all-pervading theme of Hindu philosophy and remains of methodological relevance today, the notion of a fundamental

unity in all that exists. It proposes a *monistic* rather than dualistic view of all reality, a world view in which all aspects of reality, whether material or spiritual, mundane or divine, phenomenal or transcendent, are seen to originate in and to be governed by a single, all-encompassing cause or principle that inheres and governs the world. Due to the same underlying forces that shape it, there is a unity in its infinite diversity that helps us to understand it and to deal successfully with it for practical ends. Although the Upanishads differ in the ways they interpret and often poetically (with artistic license, as it were) describe this unity, there is a remarkable unanimity in them about its importance, both in spiritual and philosophical respect:

There is an essential unity of purpose in them [the Upanishads]. They emphasize the same fundamental doctrine which may be called *monistic idealism* or *idealistic monism*. These poetic-philosophic works are full of grand imagery, extremely charming and lucid expression abounding in crystal clarity (*prasada guna*). To the mind, they bring sound philosophical doctrines and to the heart, peace and freedom. (Sharma, 2000, p. 18, italics added)

As the Upanishads formulate it, *this* world of an infinite variety of finite phenomena, and *that* infinite world of a cosmic reality of which our world is just an ever-changing expression, are one and the same. They are "one without a second" (Chandogya Upanishad, 6.2.1-2), so that we cannot properly appreciate either without appreciating the other. I find it striking – and helpful indeed – to see how carefully the Upanishads, notably in the Chandogya Upanishad and in some of the so-called "Invocations" (introductory formulas) that precede most of the principal Upanishads, differentiate and combine their references to "this" world and "that" world so as to help the student understand. For example, in the Chandogya's account of the wisdom of Shandilya, we read this about the nature of *brahman*, a central concept that we will discuss in the next section:

This universe comes forth from brahman, exists in brahman, and will return to brahman. Verily, all [this] is brahman. (*sarvam idam brahman*)
(Chandogya, 3.14.1 as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, p. 126, with "[this]" and the Sanskrit formula added; the concept of *brahman* will be introduced in the following)

It helps indeed to know that phrases such as "*this* universe" and "all *this*" refer to the visible world in which we live, or perhaps more precisely, to our descriptions and narratives about it, as distinguished from "*that*" other, invisible world of cosmic principles, a world about which we cannot say much except that it is *brahman*, the ultimate, absolute, infinite reality behind

and beyond the world of finite things and descriptions. Similarly, in the Chandogya's story about Shvetaketu, the son of Uddalaka, who after studying the Vedas for 12 years asks his father to tell him more about the nature of the Self, it is again crucial to understand the just mentioned meaning of "that":

"Yes, dear one, I will," replied his father.
 "In the beginning was only Being.
 One without a second.
 Out of itself it brought forth the cosmos
 and entered into everything it is.
 There is nothing that does not come from it.
 Of everything it is the inmost Self.
 It is the truth; it is the Self supreme.
 You are that, Shvetaketu; *you are that.*" (*tat twam asi*)
 (Chandogya, 6.2.2, with the part that begins with "There is nothing ..." being repeated eight times in verses 6.8.7-6.15.3; transl. by Easwaran, 2007, pp. 133-138; italics added, slightly edited)¹⁹⁾

In the beginning, before *brahman* manifested itself in this world of ours (but also after), there was only that "one without a second." Such all-pervading unity inheres and expresses itself – its Self – in everything that exists and consequently also in the human individual and its innermost sense of self, which prompts Uddalaka to teach his son: "You are that, Shvetaketu, *you are that.*"

Still in the Chandogya's story of Shvetaketu, the father also explains the essential unity of the two worlds – their amounting to "one only, without a second," as Müller and Navlakha's (2000, p. 186) put it in their translation of verses 6.2.1 and 2 – with these two famous metaphors (note again the careful use of "this" and "that"):

"Bring me a fruit from the nyagrodha tree." (or banyan tree, a fig tree)
 "Here it is, sir."
 "Break it. What do you see?"
 "These seeds, Father, all exceedingly small."
 "Break one. What do you see?"
 "Nothing at all."
 "That hidden essence you do not see, dear one,
 from that a whole nyagrodha tree will grow.
 There is nothing that does not come from it.
 Of everything it is the inmost Self.
 It is the truth; it is the Self supreme.
 You are that, Shvetaketu; *you are that.*" (*tat twam asi*)
 (Chandogya, 6.12.1f, as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, pp. 136, slightly edited)

and:

"Place this salt in water and bring it here tomorrow morning."
 The boy did [as his father asked him].
 "Where is that salt?" his father asked [on the next morning]. .
 "I do not see it."
 "Sip here. How does it taste?"

"Salty, Father."
 "And here? And there?"
 "I taste salt everywhere."
 "It *is* everywhere, though we see it not.
 Just so, dear one, the Self is everywhere,
 within all things, although we see it not.
 There is nothing that does not come from it.
 Of everything it is the inmost Self.
 It is the truth; it is the Self supreme.
 You are that, Shvetaketu; *you are that.*" (*tat twam asi*)
 (Chandogya, 6.13.1-3, as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, pp. 136f, slightly edited)

In all these formulations, "this" stands for the infinite diversity of this world of ours and our related descriptions and narratives, which requires us to make ourselves clear by pointing to the specific phenomena we mean: "look, this is what I am talking about." On the other hand, "that" stands for the infinite cosmic reality that inheres the manifold phenomena of this world of ours and allows consistent descriptions of it, descriptions that capture its inherent order and harmony. Note that it is due to this idea of an intrinsic order that the phenomenal world, despite its infinite diversity, is at all intelligible to human inquiry and reflection; science works by finding order in the diversity of the phenomena it studies. To that underlying source of order and unity, the Upanishads refer as *brahman*, a concept we will analyze in detail. However, we already begin to understand that since the all-pervading cosmic order also inheres the human "Self" about which Shvetaketu was asking his father, it is to be expected that in Upanishadic thought the self and brahman, too, are "one [i.e., a unity] without a second."

Monist, but pluralist at heart Pervasive as it is, this monist world view of the Upanishads does not ignore or rule out diversity at all, it merely has us deal with it more attentively and carefully. Thus an Upanishadic perspective does not deny the observation that everything that is alive and moves in "this" world tends to be different from everything else, for example, concerning the shape it assumes and the state of consciousness it reaches. At the same time, however, it also emphasizes that there is always unity in such diversity, inasmuch as the latter only expresses different shapes and states of the former. This *interplay between and unity and diversity* matters because it has important implications, regarding both the quest for knowledge and the proper conduct of life. I have already mentioned the example of science, the success of which depends on the assumption that meaningful unity can be recognized in diversity.

A second example of important implications concerns the ways we deal with human affairs. The Upanishadic message in this respect is: *we have reasons to be tolerant*. That is, we are well advised to be aware of all the differences among human beings, natural, cultural, social, and spiritual, yet at the same time to respect their intrinsic unity and sameness. Mahatma Gandhi (1957) made this theme of *unity-in-diversity* a guiding principle of his political vision, by advocating what he called a "heart unity" among all, a sense of toleration of differences embedded in a deep concern for the dignity and welfare of others:

"Heart unity" means that no matter how different you are from me – in religion, outlook, caste, level of affluence, culture, race, or sex – I identify with your well-being; I want you to be happy. Not to be like me, but to thrive in your own way.... As long as there is heart unity underneath, even our active disagreement by nonviolent means will not cause us to feel hostility to one another; on the contrary, it will bring us closer together in our joint search for truth." (Mahatma Gandhi, cited in Nagler, 2006, p. 256; cf. Nagler, 2007, p. 328).

What an inspiring, genuinely Upanishadic and yet timeless thought: we think properly about diversity when in our hearts, thoughts, and actions we search for a kind of unity that lets others thrive in their own ways. This same theme of unity-in-diversity appears to have inspired the national motto of contemporary Indonesia, which like the earlier cited motto of India is part of Indonesia's national emblem: *bhinneka tunggal ika* ("many, yet one").

Beyond metaphysics: analytical, second-order considerations Much of the discussion on the Upanishads has gone into metaphysical direction; but I find it important that the discussion does not stop there. The two examples of science and politics, briefly hinted at above, illustrate that the Upanishads' monistic metaphysics of "this" and "that" has implications that reach further and can be of epistemological (or, a bit more generally speaking, methodological) as well as ethical (practical-philosophical) relevance. They concern the nature of second-order knowledge and reflection in all conceivable domains, for example, in everyday practice, professional practice, the logic of inquiry and science, the logic of rational argumentation and discourse, research practice, ethics, and politics. What the Upanishads have to tell us – the kind of reflections they inspire – will depend on the type of second-order enterprise (or reflective practice) one is engaged in, as well as on the specific (first-order) situation at hand; but as a common denominator, the analytical scheme of first and second-order knowledge appears to be useful. It can remind us that it is always a relevant idea to ask

what the Upanishads have to tell us, beyond (but inspired by) their monist metaphysics, about the logic and ethics of good research and practice.

Sources of knowledge: inquiry and ideas Etymologically, philosophy means "love of knowledge" and thus, of learning. The Upanishads are among the earliest documents of humanity that invite us to control our destiny through learning. More than that, they also explain why it is possible: it is, as we have just seen, because there is unity in diversity. Since there is a unity of the forces or principles that shape the cosmic and the human (social) order, as well as our individual nature and consciousness, we can learn – with due effort – to better understand the world we live in and our fate in it, and thus can progress on the path to knowledge. In this invitation to study and learning, rather than just to worshipping, I see the deeply philosophical orientation of the Upanishads and their continuing relevance today.

F. Max Müller, the eminent Western scholar of Hindu philosophy and translator of the Upanishads, emphasizes the break that the Vedanta's reorientation from ritual to reflection entails in the history of ancient Indian thought:

The Upanishads are philosophical treatises, and their fundamental principle might seem with us to be subversive of all religion. In these Upanishads the whole ritual and sacrificial system of the Veda is not only ignored, but directly rejected as useless, nay as mischievous. The ancient Gods of the Veda are no longer recognized. And yet these Upanishads are looked upon [today] as perfectly orthodox, nay as the highest consummation of the Brahmanic religion.

This was brought about by the recognition of a very simple fact which nearly all other religions seem to have ignored. It was recognized in India from very early times that the religion of a man cannot be and ought not to be the same as that of a child; and again, that with the growth of the mind, the religious ideas of an old man must differ from those of an active man of the world. (Müller, 1904/2013, p. 16)

To this reorientation conforms the shift from worship and sacrifice to learning and knowledge as major guides towards a proper practice of life (including religious as well as everyday practice), and a corresponding interest not only in metaphysical but also in epistemological questions. Upanishadic epistemology, as we have noted, is *pramana-sastra*, the theory or study of the pramanas (sources of knowledge or tools of inquiry). Major sources of knowledge are seen in the triad of perception, of inference, and of testimony by others (see, e.g., Phillips, 2011):

1. *Perception*, the most important of the three, is mainly but not exclusively thought of as sensory perception (there are different views as to whether "inner" consciousness is also to be considered as a valid source of

perception).

2. *Testimony*, the second most important, stands for oral evidence offered by a competent speaker (e.g., a sage or a *brahmin*, or a person well educated or experienced in the subject at hand) or for a statement from the Vedas or some other source acknowledged as authoritative.
3. *Inference*, finally, provides derived knowledge in the form of conclusions gained from certified perception or trustworthy testimony through careful reflection (e.g., early forms of syllogism, conclusion from analogy, and "suppositional" reasoning, the latter being a form of inference not unlike what Kant later meant with "transcendental" reasoning or Habermas today with "presuppositional analysis," e.g., by means of "universal-pragmatic" or "formal-pragmatic" reasoning), as well as through dialogue (e.g., characteristically, teacher-student dialogue).

Consequently also *logic*, understood as the study of valid forms of argument and inference (*tarka-vidya*, "science of argument," e.g., Ganeri, 2001, p. 7, cf. pp. 151-167) rather than of deductive logic only, becomes a subject of *pramana-sastra*. So does the study of *language* as a means to formulate, transmit, and preserve knowledge, specifically of course *Sanskrit*, the language of the shruti. There are early developments of linguistic disciplines such as phonetics, syntax, semantics, etymology, and grammar. Panini's (1977) *Ashtadhyayi*, a collection of some 4,000 grammatical rules (in the form of *sutras*) written in the 6th to 5th century BCE (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013d; other sources locate it in the 4th century BCE, e.g. Hamilton, 2001, p. 60) stands out as an impressive work that covers all the just mentioned subdisciplines of a philosophy of language and employs them to clarify the meaning of Sanskrit words and the rules of their proper employment; it has been instrumental in establishing the "classical" form and usage of Sanskrit as a ceremonial and learned language and has remained an authoritative source that is still used and cited today (see Hamilton, 2001, pp. 60-62, for a short but interesting appreciation of the historical merits of Panini's grammar).

This early interest of the Vedic tradition in the philosophies of knowledge and language is influential to this date, in that India has developed a long-standing tradition of epistemological and language-analytical scholarship, not only but also as applied to the ancient scriptures. Remarkably, unlike today's analytical tradition in "Western" philosophy, the ancient Indian interest in the sources of knowledge and the role of language did not bring about a diminished appreciation of metaphysical questions but

rather, it lead to a more careful way of dealing with them. Perhaps this is due in part to the fact that the Upanishadic metaphysics of "this" and "that" makes it so clear how limited ordinary human knowledge (i.e., knowledge as it can be gained by study and inquiry) is bound to remain in the face of the world of the "that," which nevertheless shapes this world of ours. Clearly (at least, for a Hindu thinker), additional sources of insight are needed, beyond the *pramanas* already mentioned.

One need not think of mystic experience and other esoteric sources of insight only in this context. In addition to the just mentioned study of language and logic, there is surely also a role, in Eastern no less than in Western thought, for the study of the nature and role of *general ideas* – ideas of reason that lead us beyond what we can know empirically but which are bound to remain problematic concepts. Since both the outer, transcendent reality of the cosmos and the inner, spiritual reality of the human self (the two main themes of the Upanishads) reach beyond what we can hope to know through inquiry, it is indeed to be expected that general ideas play no less an epistemological and methodological role in the Upanishads than in Western philosophy (e.g., of particular interest to us, in practical philosophy). Although they are basically metaphysical ideas, there is no reason why they should not lend themselves to methodological analysis.

This is the topic to which we must now return. Are there examples of major concepts in the Upanishads that do play such a double role as metaphysical *and* methodological concepts? And if so, how do the Upanishads conceive of their proper use and perhaps also of related basic "movements of thought" as we have sketched them out in the previous essay of the series with respect to Western ideas of reason? With this sort of questions in mind, I have selected three concepts that play a particular role in the Upanishads and which I also find particularly interesting from a methodological point of view, the first two well known in Western philosophy, the third less so – *brahman*, *atman*, *and jagat*. Their analysis and discussion will be in the center of the next part of this excursion into the world of ideas of ancient India.

(To be continued)

Notes

15) Navlakha (2000, p. x) offers a useful overview in tabular form of the four strands of Vedas, showing their internal organization around the four compilations of Samhitas. An earlier account by Monier-Williams (1877, pp. 14-16) structures the Vedas into only three

main strands, to which he refers as "the three portions of the Veda, viz. Mantra, Brahmana, and Upanishad." As he explains, these three portions or subdivisions of the Veda are constituted by the following types of text:

1. *Mantra*, prayer and praise, embodied in texts and metrical hymns.
 2. *Brahmana*, or ritualistic precept and illustration written in prose and occasional verse.
 3. *Upanishad*, mystical or secret doctrine, appended to the aforesaid Brahmana, and written in prose and occasional verse.
- (Monier-Williams, 1877, p. 18, cf. p. 43)

A third major account distinguishes two main parts of the Vedas, the *Karma kanda* (meaning "the part relating to religious works," Navlakha, 2000, p. ix) and the *Jnana kanda* (meaning "the knowledge part," Navlakha, 2000, p. x). Each part is then divided into two collections of *shruti* or revealed texts; the Samhitas (or Mantras, in the scheme of Monier-Williams) and Brahmanas make up the Karma kanda, while the Aranyakas and the Upanishads make up the Jnana kanda. The reason why Monier-Williams does not consider the Aranyakas in his scheme appears to be that he counts them among the Brahmanas; he colorfully describes them as "certain chapters of the Brahmanas, so awe-inspiring and profound, that they were required to be read in the solitude of the forests." (1877, p. 44) The name "Aranyaka" indeed means as much as "of the forest" (e.g., Easwaran, 2007, p. 338). The common denominator of the Aranyakas and the Upanishads is that they represent the more reflective and philosophical (rather than merely ritual and religious) parts of the Veda. [\[BACK\]](#)

16) There are also non-Vedic (or "non-orthodox") traditions of Indian spirituality and philosophy, notably those of [Buddhism](#), [Jainism](#), [Sikhism](#), and [Brahmoism](#) (the latter not to be confused with [Brahmanism](#), which belongs to the Vedic tradition). These do not regard the Veda scriptures as authoritative sources and for this reason are referred to in Hindu texts as "non-orthodox" or "heterodox" texts, as distinguished from the Vedic orthodoxy. I will not consider these non-Vedic sources of Indian philosophical thought in the present essay at all; see King (1999) for a scholarly but very readable introduction to the subject of "Indian philosophy," including a discussion of the problematic side of this notion. [\[BACK\]](#)

17) The sources that I have consulted differ about the period of origin for the early Upanishads (i.e., those Upanishads which are directly linked to the earlier three strands of the Veda). For example, Müller (1879, p. lxxvii) ascribes their origin to a time "older than 600 B.C., i.e., anterior to the rise of Buddhism" and Hume (1996, p.6) to "about 600 or 500 B.C."; Phillips (1996, p. 8) dates them between 800 and 300 BCE, Navlakha (2000, p. x) between 900 and 600 BCE, and Hamilton (2001, p. 108) between 800 and 500 BCE; and the Encyclopaedia Britannica (2013c) even inconsistently dates the Upanishads between 1000 and 600 BCE (subsection "Sacred Texts") and between 700 and 500 BCE (subsection "The Upanishads"). [\[BACK\]](#)

18) A protreptic text seeks not just to inform but also to instruct and transform students or readers through knowledge and insight. The term comes from Aristotle's text *Protreptikos* (literally = exhortation, instruction), of which only fragments have survived. A pertinent example of a protreptic text from classical Western philosophy is Seneca's *De brevitate vita*. [\[BACK\]](#)

19) I appreciate Easwaran's translation for its elegance and simplicity. However, as compared to Müller and Navlakha's (2000) translation, it has a slightly one-sided religious bent and appears to give a bit more weight to literary elegance as compared to scholarly precision. For my present purpose I have found it useful to rely on Easwaran but to slightly edit his translation in two respects (minor changes that also apply to subsequent citations from the Upanishads inasmuch as they are marked as "slightly edited"):

(a) In the references to brahman, I have replaced Easwaran's use of the personified "he" and "him" by "it." This conforms better to the understanding that I propose, and it is backed by Müller and Navlakha (2000). Their translation of the final three lines (those which are subsequently repeated several times in the Chandogya, beginning with verse 6.8.7) reads as follows:

Now that which is that subtle essence [the root of all], in it all that exists has its self. It is the true. It is the Self, and thou, O Svetaketu, art it. (Müller and Navlakha, 2000, p. 190, brackets original; read "all this" for "all").

For comparison, here is also Olivelle's similar translation:

The finest essence here – that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth; that is the self (*atman*). And that's how you are, Svetaketu. (Olivelle, 1996, p. 152)

(b) In this and in the previous quote from the Chandogya, I have added (in italics) the original Sanskrit wording, as it stands for two of the four most famous short formulas by which the Upanishads sum up their essential teachings – *sarvam idam brahman* ("all [this] is brahman") and *tat twam asi* ("you are that" or, more literally, "that is how you are"). The two other are *ahimsa paramo dharma* ("the highest law is nonviolence," Ghandi's Upanishadic principle of political struggle) and *tena tyaktena bhujjitha*, "renounce and enjoy," a key Hindu principle expressed in the opening verse of the Isha Upanishad, which we will analyze later in some detail (see Seventh Reflection, in the next essay). For a helpful introductory discussion of all four formulas, see Nagler (2007, pp. 316-322).

[\[BACK\]](#)

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September-October, 2014



Berne's cathedral (built 1421-1893): an act done with knowledge and faith that grew in power

„**T**he act done with knowledge,
with inner awareness and faith, grows in power.”

(Chandogya Upanishad, 1.1.10, as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, p. 125)

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