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May-June 2015

***The Rational, the Moral, and the General: An Exploration
Part 5 (Revised): Ideas in Ancient Indian Thought / Analysis***



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An "Eastern" perspective: three ancient Indian ideas (continued) In the previous essay, we familiarized ourselves with the world of ideas of the Vedic tradition of ancient Indian philosophy and particularly with the Upanishads. The present second essay focuses on three concepts that play an important role in the Upanishads and also appear particularly interesting from a methodological point of view: *brahman*, *atman*, and *jagat*. Like earlier essays in this series, this one and its sequels are again structured into "Intermediate Reflections," to emphasize the exploratory character of the considerations in question. The first of these (and sixth overall), which makes up the present essay, analyzes the meaning of the three concepts as they are employed in the Upanishads. A subsequent reflection, which will be offered in the next contribution to the series, will discuss a specific example in the form of one of the most famous verses of the Upanishads. Two later reflections, planned for the final part of the series, will be dedicated to a complementary, language-analytical view of the Upanishads and to the question of what we can learn from Upanishadic thought, and particularly from the three core ideas we analyzed, about the proper use of general ideas today.

***Sixth intermediate reflection:
Three essential ideas of ancient Indian thought***

A caveat Before we consider the etymology and meaning of the three concepts of *brahman*, *atman*, and *jagat*, a word of caution is in order. Being thoroughly grounded in a Western, Kantian tradition of thought, I do not assume that with some fragmentary (though careful) reading of English translations of ancient Indian texts, combined with some introductory accounts and commentaries, it is possible to gain a sufficient understanding of the entirely different tradition of thought in which they originate, the Vedic tradition. I accept the cautionary words of Müller (1879), who in the Preface to his translation of the Upanishads notes that there are three basic

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***Revised version of
15 June 2015****

***Note:** This is a revised version of the fifth essay on the role of general ideas in rational thought and action. Like the previously **revised version of Part 4**, it reviews the original text with a view to even more consistently avoiding a mainly religious and metaphysical reading of the Upanishads as it is customary in the literature, in favour of a more analytical reading that would give adequate consideration to the philosophical and methodological implications of Upanishadic thought. The original version of the essay appeared in the *Bimonthly of November-December 2014*.

obstacles to understanding these ancient "sacred texts of the East," as he calls them, from a modern Western perspective:

I must begin this series of translations of the Sacred Books of the East with three cautions:--the first, referring to the character of the original texts here translated; the second, with regard to the difficulties in making a proper use of translations; the third, showing what is possible and what is impossible in rendering ancient thought into modern speech. (Müller, 1879, p. ix)

In short, we must never forget that deep-seated differences of culture, language, and epoch create a distance to these ancient texts that is difficult to overcome, certainly for a Western mind. As a result of all three difficulties, particularly the first, Müller notes that the Upanishads, along with their bright and illuminating sides, also have their "dark" (1879, p. xi) and at times "almost unintelligible" (1879, p. xiv) sides. They can tell us about "the dawn of religious [and I would add: philosophical] consciousness of man," something that "must always remain one of the most inspiring and hallowing sights in the whole history of the world" (1879, p. xi); but there is also "much that is strange and startling. ... tedious ... [and] difficult to construe and to understand." (1879, p. xii)

If an eminent scholar like Müller feels compelled to avow of such obstacles in studying the *Upanishads*, it should be clear (and I want to leave no doubts) that my reading of these texts cannot aim at more than a very limited understanding; limited, that is, by my current interest in the role of general ideas within the Western tradition of rational ethics. My interest is a methodological rather than a metaphysical one, and this methodological interest aims at questions of ethics rather than of religion. I would not want to overly stress these two distinctions though. Methodological reflection does not preclude awareness of metaphysical assumptions but rather, calls for it. Many of the metaphysical considerations one finds in the Upanishads can very well be said to be motivated by an interest in gaining deeper knowledge and understanding. Nor has my reading of the Upanishads convinced me that opposing religious and ethical questions in any strict way would do justice to them; rather, the two issues were not yet differentiated in these old texts as clearly as we find it necessary today. Accordingly these texts leave room for different readings, in which religious and ethical questions may be given varying importance but very often cannot be separated entirely, just as metaphysical and methodological questions are not sharply distinguished in them. With respect to both oppositions, we face a question of emphasis and balance rather than a true alternative or even a

single "true" reading.

My effort, then, is limited by a guiding interest in the methodological and ethical aspects of Upanishadic thought, yet it cannot and does not attempt to altogether "avoid" the metaphysical and religious aspects that have been in the center of the Upanishads' traditional reception. To put it differently, the following analysis seeks to remain open-minded and flexible with regard to the attention it gives to all these aspects and the role they play in the Upanishads, without thereby losing sight of its primarily methodological and ethical interest. Methodologically speaking, the aim is to develop the notion of a "critically contextualist" handling of general ideas, that is, to explore the ways in which a meaningful and adequately self-reflecting use of general ideas such as the moral idea and the systems idea calls for a critical consideration of particular situations, and *vice-versa*. Just as general ideas need the "reality check" of particular observations, particular considerations gain their meaning only in the light of general notions. Proper contextualization is the key to both requirements. It is within this context (*sic*) that what I'll say about the three Upanishadic concepts of "brahman," "atman," and "jagat" should be understood and used. For once, the (limited) end of my undertaking hopefully justifies its (equally limited) means and scope. With these cautionary remarks in mind, let us now turn to the three selected concepts.

Three essential Upanishadic ideas: *brahman*, *atman*, and *jagat*

"Brahman" The major theme of all Vedanta texts and particularly of the Upanishads is the human endeavor of seeking knowledge. Adequate knowledge is understood to reach beyond the unstable and fragmentary reality of our phenomenal experience and to consider the larger, invisible reality that lies beyond it and conditions it, in the form of an infinite cosmic reality without and an unfathomable spiritual reality within. It is tempting to compare this Upanishadic conception of knowledge with Kant's conception of a transcendent (unknowable) or "noumenal" (ideational) aspect that is part of all possible knowledge and is presupposed in it. I would not overemphasize the parallel – there are also important differences, as we will see later on (see, e.g., the subsection on "metaphysics and methodology" below) – but it may help readers coming from a "Western" background in capturing the epistemological, not just religious, relevance of the

Upanishadic notion of brahman. Similarly to the way Kantian "transcendental" reflection helps us understand this ideational basis of human knowledge, Upanishadic reflection can help us understand that all human knowledge is conditioned by notions of some larger, non-phenomenal, reality. As in Kant's work, it is a reality that we cannot know as such but which nevertheless manifests itself in the limited knowledge of the phenomenal world that is available to us, as well as in our innermost consciousness and spirituality, the "self." Accordingly we cannot hope to acquire adequate knowledge of the world and of ourselves without striving to understand that other reality. This ultimate ground of all experiential knowledge – or in more analytical terms: the universal in everything particular – is what the Upanishads call *brahman*. The Upanishadic thinker who seeks to acquire adequate knowledge of the world and of him- or herself must therefore seek to gain insight into the nature of brahman. *Seeking knowledge* becomes tantamount to *seeking brahman*.

Seeking knowledge, seeking brahman Although it would be an error to assume that as humans we can ever acquire adequate knowledge of brahman, it would be just as mistaken to assume that we can gain adequate knowledge of this world of ours without it, that is, without an effort of gaining at least some basic or approximate insight into the nature of cosmic and inner reality. The two forms or contexts of knowledge – visible reality on the one hand and cosmic and inner reality on the other – are inseparable; for brahman manifests itself in both. In Upanishadic terms, as we noted in both versions of the previous essay (Ulrich, 2014c, pp. 12-14; 2015, pp. 15f and 19), brahman and the real world are *one without a second* (Chandogya Upanishad, 6.2.1-2). In Kantian terms, brahman embodies the notion of the immanence of the noumenal (or transcendent, universal) in the phenomenal, that is, in all experience and knowledge. As a *transcendent* reality, the nature of brahman is prior to and "beyond all distinctions or forms" (Easwaran, 2007, p. 339); which is to say, we cannot grasp it in our perceptions and descriptions of the world. As an *immanent reality*, however, it nevertheless permeates or, as the Upanishads put it, "dwells in" these perceptions and descriptions. We can only understand what these perceptions mean inasmuch as we conceive of them as imperfect and fragmentary expressions of that other, larger or higher reality that is not accessible to us in any direct and objective way, but of which we can at least try to gain some approximate

notion by means of careful observation and reflection.

In the analytical terms used earlier, in Part 4 (see Ulrich, 2014c, pp. 4, 8, 11, 15; 2015, pp. 6, 9f, 13, and 20), we might also understand brahman to embody the universe of *second-order knowledge* and of related conceptual efforts and tools. Without it we cannot adequately understand our first-order knowledge, that is, more accurately, the manifold particular universes within which the individual's perceptions, thoughts, and actions move at any time. Among such second-order devices I would count the main subject of this series of essays, general ideas and principles of reason, along with categories of knowable things, modalities of meaningful statements, forms of valid inferences or arguments, and other concepts that enable us to think and talk clearly about first-order knowledge and its limitations.

Root meanings The word “brahman” (from the Sanskrit root *brh-*, to swell, expand, grow, roar) is basically a *neuter* noun that stands for an *abstract* concept of the universe – the ground of all being – rather than for a personification of its divine originator. However, the latter interpretation can also be found (e.g., in the Isha Upanishad) and the word can then, as in a few other specific meanings, take the masculine gender. In between an entirely impersonal and a personified notion lies a third frequent understanding of brahman, as the one universal spirit or soul that is thought to inhere the entire universe and thus also the human spirit. Forth and finally, since there is no sharp distinction between the knowledge that an enlightened person is seeking to acquire and the sources of such knowledge, the term brahman can also be found historically to stand for the sacred texts or, in the previous oral tradition, the sacred words that reveal the knowledge in question. If there is a common denominator of these various, partly metaphysical and partly religious meanings, we might see it in the notion that brahman is always *that which needs to be studied* on the path to enlightenment – yet another reference to second-order knowledge, in the analytical terms adopted in the previous essay.

This is obviously a highly simplified account of the etymology of the *brahman* concept, given that the major Sanskrit-English dictionary of Monier-Williams (1899, p. 737f, and 1872, pp. 689 and 692f; cf. Cologne Project, 1997/2008 and 2013/14, also Monier-Williams et al., 2008) lists no less than some 27 meanings of *brahman*. Even though some of these many

meanings identified by Monier-Williams in the 19th century may be dubious from the perspective of modern Sanskrit scholarship (J. Dash, 2015; D.P. Dash, 2015), no alternative, similarly authoritative source is available to this date and I will therefore rely mainly on this one major source. **Table 1** offers a selection and also highlights some of the meanings of most interest here.

Table 1: Selected meanings of *brahman*

Source: Monier-Williams, 1899, 737f and 741, and 1872, pp. 689, 692f, abridged and simplified

ब्रह्मन्

brahman, bráhman, n[neuter gender].

(lit. "growth," "expansion," "evolution," "development," "swelling of the spirit or soul"), from *brih*, pious effusion or utterance, outpouring of the heart in worshipping the gods, prayer.

the sacred word (as opp. to *vac*, the word of man), the *veda*, a sacred text, a text or *mantra* used as a spell [read: magic formula]; the sacred syllable Om.

the *brAhmaNa* portion of the *veda*.

religious or spiritual knowledge (opp. to religious observances and bodily mortification such as *tapas*).

holy life (esp. continence, chastity; cf. *brahma-carya*).

(exceptionally treated as *m*.) the *brahma* or [the] one self-existent impersonal Spirit, the one universal Soul (or one divine essence and source from which all created things emanate or with which they are identified and to which they return), the Self-existent, the Absolute, the Eternal (not generally an object of worship, but rather of meditation and knowledge).

bráhman, n[neuter gender]. the class of men who are the repositories and communicators of sacred knowledge, the Brahmanical caste as a body (rarely an individual Brahman).

wealth; final emancipation.

brahmán, m[masculine gender]. one who prays, a devout or religious man, a Bráhman who is a knower of Vedic texts or spells, one versed in sacred knowledge.

the intellect (=buddhi).

one of the four principal priests or *ritvijas*; the brahman was the most learned of them and was required to know the three vedas, to supervise the sacrifice and to set right mistakes; at a later period his functions were based especially on the atharva-veda).

brahma, m[masculine gender]. the one impersonal universal Spirit manifested as a personal Creator and as the first of the triad of personal gods (he never appears to have become an object of general worship, though he has two temples in India).

brAhma, n[neuter gender]. the one self-existent Spirit, the Absolute.

sacred study, the study of the Vedas.

brAhma, m[masculine gender]. a priest.

brAhma, mf [masculine or feminine gender]. relating to sacred knowledge, prescribed by the Vedas, scriptural; sacred to the Vedas; relating or belonging to the brahmins or the sacerdotal class.

brahmin, mfn [masculine, feminine or neutral gender]. belonging or relating to brahman or brahma; possessing sacred knowledge.

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Derived meanings The neuter noun *brahman* should not be confused with its masculine version, which is also written "brahmán" or, more frequently in English, "brahmin," rarely also "brahmana." A *brahmin* is "a knower of

Vedic texts" (Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 738; Macdonnell, 1929, p. 193); a devout man, priest or spiritual teacher (guru) "versed in sacred texts" (1872, p. 689); a seeker on the path to knowledge of brahman (*brahmavidya*) who usually is also a member of the brahmanic caste. The term can also stand for the caste itself, as "the class of men who are the repositories and communicators of sacred knowledge" (1899, p. 738), in which case it is used in the neuter gender.

Further, the noun *brahma* (except as part of compounds) should be distinguished from *brahman*. In the neuter gender it stands for a personification of brahman that is conceived in a rather abstract way, as a universal consciousness or "universal spirit" that *manifests* itself in the world and in the human individual. There are also a number of derivative meanings (partly used in composite terms such as *brahmavidya* or *brahmacharya*, the study and practice of brahmanic knowledge) in which the term often takes the masculine or (rarely) the feminine gender and designates either the "sacred knowledge" of the Vedas or the person who possesses it. In contemporary, post-Vedic (and thus also post-Vedantic) Hindu religion, finally, *brahma* is now often also understood as referring to a personal creator-God and as such is worshipped as the main god in the divine trinity (or *trimurti*) of *Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva*, an understanding that is not, however, characteristic of Upanishadic thought.

Personal reading The concept of primary interest to us is the abstract, impersonal notion of brahman as an *invisible reality* that lies beyond, yet informs, all we can perceive and say about the world, a "source from which all created things emanate" (Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 737, similarly 1872, p. 689) and which accordingly we would need to understand so as to ensure reliable knowledge and proper action. Navlakha (2000) nicely summarizes this non-religious, philosophical understanding:

Brahman as the absolute reality is purely impersonal, and is not to be confused with a personal God. The significance of *brahman* is metaphysical, not theological. *Brahman* is the featureless absolute, which unless a contextual necessity otherwise demands, is most appropriately referred to as 'It'. [Which is to say, the] *brahman* of the Upanishads is also not to be seen as the Creator God, as in Judaeo-Christian tradition. There is no creation as such in Vedanta. The universe is evolved out of *brahman*. [...] Thus *brahman* is the one and only cause of the coming into existence of the universe. *Brahman* is whole and unfolds itself out in the form of the universe, out of its own substance, and as a means of knowing itself. [...] Thus there is nothing, not even the minutest part of the material world, that is not wholly *brahman*. Within and without, it is all *brahman*. (Navlakha, 2000, p. xviiiif)

For our present purpose, I take it indeed that "the significance of brahman is metaphysical, not theological," and that its essential characteristic is that of an all-encompassing and "featureless absolute," a "universe" "within and without" our awareness of the world. It "unfolds itself ... out of its own substance," that is, it is self-contained (i.e., not contingent on any condition external to it) and thus refers us to the ultimate (or, speaking with Kant, transcendental) ground of the possibility of knowledge at all, namely, that there be some kind of deep-seated convergence of the cognitive conditions that account for the *intelligibility* of the world to human inquirers and of the ontological conditions that account for the *reality* of the world as we "realize" (recognize and create) it through inquiry and practice – the ground-sustaining function of *brahman* in Upanishadic epistemology that is reminiscent of Kant's (1787, B193ff, esp. 197) "highest principle of all synthetic judgments" (cf. Ulrich, 1983, pp. 208 and 283f).

Such appreciation on the part of a Kantian thinker for a metaphysical reading may appear surprising at first glance; but the point is of course that I share Navlakha's plea for a metaphysical rather than just religious understanding. As we said earlier, what matters is not that we avoid metaphysics (an impossible feat) but how we handle it. *Well-understood metaphysics invites critique*, whether of a transcendental or of a more contemporary analytical (e.g., linguistic, logical, semantic, discourse-theoretical, argumentation-theoretical) or empirical (e.g., psychological, social-scientific, historical, discourse-critical, or ethical) kind.

Seen in this way, the Upanishadic metaphysics of "this" and "that" reality (compare the earlier characterization in the introductory essay, see Ulrich, 2014c, pp. 11-15 and 18) is not a bad starting point. It certainly encourages methodological reflection. For example, it reminds us of the second-order knowledge that is implicit in all first-order knowledge, and thus of the need for questioning the ways in which our knowledge – or what we take for it – depends on such second-order assumptions. The *Upanishadic difference between "this" and "that"* creates distance, and thus a basis for such reflection. It makes it clear that we don't really (sic) understand this world of ours, or what we believe to know about it, unless we reflect on that larger universe of which our real-world is only a part – that fuller reality which consists in the confluence of "this" and "that."

As a second, more specific example, we may think of Kant's notion of general ideas of reason: it seems to me that there are striking parallels between their methodological significance and that of a non-religious concept of "brahman." In both cases we face ideas that exceed the reach of ordinary human knowledge and which insofar are bound to remain problematic; at the same time, in both cases we also recognize that reasonable thought cannot do without them. As we found in our earlier discussion of Kant's understanding of general ideas (see Ulrich, 2014a, "Third intermediate reflection"), we cannot think of a series of conditions that would explain any specific phenomenon of interest, without also thinking of an ultimate, unconditioned condition. As Kant (1787, B444) puts it, "for a given conditioned, the whole series of conditions subordinated to each other is likewise given"; but that "whole series" (i.e., totality) of conditions is itself unconditioned, as otherwise it would depend on some further condition and thus could not furnish a complete explanation (cf. 1787, B379, B383f, B444 and B445n). Explanations that really explain anything will always reach beyond the experiential world of conditioned phenomena; of necessity they include general ideas that refer us to some unconditioned whole of conditions, which is what Kant means by *pure concepts of reason*. "Concepts of reason contain the unconditioned." (1787, B367) Likewise, in the Upanishads, when brahman is said to stand for the "ground of all being" or "source from which all created things emanate" (Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 738), or is described as the "one," "ultimate" and "absolute" (i.e., unconditioned) reality that lies behind people's multiple realities, such a notion amounts no less to an unavoidable idea of reason than does Kant's notion of a totality of conditions that is itself unconditioned.

Metaphysics and methodology The methodological significance of *brahman* for the practice of reason shines through in many metaphysical characterizations, both in the Upanishads themselves and in the secondary literature. As an illustration from the Upanishads, there is this famous prayer in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* in which the devotee seeks guidance on the search for reality and self-realization:

Lead me from the unreal to the real!
 Lead me from darkness to light!
 Lead me from death to immortality!

(Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 1.3.28, as transl. by Müller and Navlakha, 2000, p. 76, similarly Olivelle, 1996, p. 12f)

That is to say, truth is not of this world; an enlightened notion of reality is not to be found in the phenomenal world alone. Our human "real world" is deceptive, a source of darkness rather than light. It obscures rather than illuminates that basic source of insight that is called brahman and which is the only reliable source of orientation for proper thought and action.

This Upanishadic explanation of the real world's deceptiveness is metaphysical, but not therefore methodologically irrelevant. In fact, its methodological implications are largely equivalent to those of Kant's similar conception of a *noumenal* (i.e., intelligible, ideational) world as distinguished from the phenomenal (observable, experiential) world. Both pairs of concepts are about our notion of reality; both involve metaphysical assumptions that obviously remain open to challenge. Both frameworks also handle their assumptions in a critically self-reflective fashion; they do not claim that the metaphysical is knowable. Nor do they fall into the trap of metaphysical dualism, which would mean to treat "this" and "that" (or the phenomenal and the noumenal) as substantially separate entities. Rather, the metaphysical assumptions in question function as calls to a discipline of critical self-reflection on the part of the knowing subject. They represent critical reminders, not presumptions of knowledge. Interestingly, the two frameworks share this *critical orientation* although they differ in the ways they understand and handle their metaphysical underpinnings: while for the Upanishadic thinkers, brahman is a symbol of the objective world that is ineffable but real, as opposed to the phenomenal world's deceptiveness, Kant's *Critique* does not of course permit any reification of the noumenal world; he understands it as a transcendental (i.e., methodological) rather than transcendent (i.e., metaphysical) concept. Kant thus puts the relationship of the noumenal (metaphysical) and the phenomenal (experiential) – of "that" and "this" world – on its head: it is not the absolute and universal (and for some, the esoteric) but the empirical and particular (the exoteric) which for Kant constitutes "reality." Reality for Kant is the knowable, while for the Upanishads it is the unknowable. But the methodological challenge remains largely the same: for Kant, too, there is no such thing as a direct access to reality, for the empirical is always already informed by our cognitive apparatus or, in Kant's more precise terms, by reason's *a priori* categories and ideas. Both frameworks, then, live up to the demand of reason that we formulated above: "well-understood metaphysics invites critique."

As an illustration from the secondary literature, let us consider one of those many descriptions of brahman that are reminiscent of Kant's recognition of the unavoidability of the idea of a totality of conditions that is itself unconditioned (the basic principle of reason). In his *Fundamentals of Indian Philosophy*, Puligandla (1977, p. 222) describes brahman as an "unchanging reality *amidst* and beyond the world" (my italics). The "amidst" is apt to remind us that whenever we try to describe the real world, we are engaged in an effort of picturing the unpicturable. Similarly, we have already observed that we cannot "really" explain any real-world phenomena without presupposing that there is a complete series of conditions – perhaps also some fundamental, unifying force or principle – that would indeed allow us to explain the conditioned nature of things the way we customarily do it and rely upon, whether in science or philosophy, in everyday argumentation or practical action. Whether such an unconditional, unifying force or principle indeed exists and how it is to be defined and proven, we ultimately have no way to tell; but neither in Upanishadic nor in Kantian thought we depend on such an ontological proof to recognize that without the notion of an unconditioned condition, we cannot think and talk clearly about our knowledge of the world and its limitations. It is quite sufficient for methodological purposes to recognize that what we can know empirically (the phenomenal world) is not identical with reality and conversely, that the real lies at least partly beyond the phenomenal and therefore also beyond knowledge. Recognizing a *lack* of knowledge can be a basis for compelling methodological reflections and conclusions. The Upanishadic way of recognizing this lack of knowledge is by situating brahman *amidst and beyond* this world of ours, and by consequently conceiving of the quest for adequate knowledge as a relentless effort of *seeking brahman* – or, to put it more carefully, of seeking to *get closer* to knowing brahman – for instance, through meditative and mystical means; through a discipline of self-reflection and self-limitation; and ultimately, through one's entire practice of life.

To be sure, it is to be expected in view of brahman's ineffable nature that the Upanishads and their commentators suggest many different descriptions of it. Along with their ancient, religious and metaphysical (and moreover often mystic) language, this circumstance does not make the task easier. Still, if we are to believe the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "they concur in the definition of *brahman* as eternal, conscious, irreducible, infinite, omnipresent, spiritual

source of the universe of finiteness and change." (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013b) In the light of what we just said, such a definition must look excessively metaphysical indeed. To do justice to the *Encyclopaedia*, it mirrors the language of the Upanishads and of most commentators. No faithful account of the Upanishads can entirely avoid explaining them in their own terms, so readers will also find some metaphysical language in my continuing account. However, as my reference to Kant should make clear, even such traditional language lends itself to methodological analysis and can then yield considerations that are relevant to our time. Methodological discussion as I understand it is about the *proper use of reason* (i.e., about the meaning of rationality) in pursuing theoretical or practical ends. So, instead of complaining about the metaphysical character of the Upanishads, we can make a difference by analyzing what they have to tell us about the proper use of reason. Why not try to do this from a critical, contemporary perspective, while still trying to remain faithful to the language, spirit and wisdom of these ancient texts?

The proper use of reason and the quest for practical excellence The proposed methodological interest in the Upanishads is quite compatible, I think, with their essential orientation towards the practical: in Upanishadic thought, the study of brahman matters as much for mastering our lives as for purely speculative reasons. Remember what we said in the introductory essay about the importance of concepts such as *svadharma* (one's individual *dharma* or "law") and *karma* (from *karman* = work, action, performance; one's record of good deeds which is effective as cause of one's future fate). Their essential, practical concern is to guide us in developing right thought and conduct on the path to individual self-realization. Similar observations could be made about the implications of such concepts for professional self-realization, for example, by cultivating high standards of excellence in one's practices of inquiry, consultancy, and other uses of professional expertise. The quest for practical excellence requires no less an effort of self-reflection and self-limitation, along with clear and consistent reasoning, than does the search for theoretical understanding.

As always, such demands are more easily formulated than put into practice. In practice, they face us with considerable difficulties. Specifically, as we have emphasized with reference to Kant, the proper use of reason depends on considering all the circumstances that might be relevant, not just those that

present themselves immediately and/or conform to our private interests. Whether for practical or theoretical ends – a distinction that the Upanishads do not draw as sharply as we tend to do it nowadays – the need for maintaining the integrity of reason entails a need for comprehensiveness with respect to the conditions or circumstances we take into account. Any other kind of account of situations and what might be done about them is not only potentially deceptive but also arbitrary, in that it relies on selections of relevant circumstances that remain unconsidered, if not undeclared and unsubstantiated. On the other hand, complete rationality is obviously beyond our capabilities, both in thought and in action. We are well advised to strive for it, but not to claim it. This is the basic philosophical *dilemma* with which the Upanishadic demand of "seeking to know brahman" confronts us: the simultaneous need for, and unavailability of, an objective and comprehensive grasp of reality beyond the ways it manifests itself to us or interests us privately, whether in everyday life or in situations of professional intervention. In Upanishadic terms, to understand this world of ours we must also strive to comprehend that other world which lies beyond it but is part of the total reality.

The better one understands this dilemma, the more one will also appreciate the often mystic and poetic (rather than strictly philosophical) approach of the Upanishads. What at first glance might look like an escape – a mere way of avoiding a philosophical difficulty – becomes understandable as a methodically pertinent response: its point is *practicing detachment*. To understand our daily world of experience and action, we need a *discipline of seeking distance*. Distance, that is, from our usual ways of being situated in the world, which raise in us egocentric and short-sighted concerns and thus prevent us from seeing "situations" as clearly and objectively as proper thought and action would require. Thus understood, the mystic and metaphysical language of the Upanishads carries a deeply philosophical message indeed. In essence, though perhaps not in formulation and elaboration, this message is akin to that of Kant: knowledge, unless it is subject to the proper use of reason, is as much a source of error as it is a source of certainty.²⁰⁾

The problem of holism A traditional way of framing the dilemma in Western philosophy is in terms of the problem of holism. Whatever we know, think, and say about the world, it is insufficient as measured by the

An Upanishadic Invocation

ॐ पूर्णमदः पूर्णमिदं पूर्णात् पूर्णमुदच्यते ।
पूर्णस्य पूर्णमादाय पूर्णमेवावशिष्यते ॥
ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

latter's holistic nature. This methodological implication comes to the fore in the *invocation* (or incantation) that introduces several of the Upanishads belonging to the

Yajur Veda, among them in particular the Brihadaranyaka, Isha, and Shvetashvatara Upanishads. I cite their identical invocation first in Sanskrit (in Devanagari script above and in Roman transliteration below) and then in three slightly different translations, all of which are customary in the literature.

*om purnamadah purnamidam purnaat purnamudachyate
purnasya purnaamadaya purnameva vashishyate
om shanti shanti shanti*

(Source: Swami J. [n.d.], <http://www.swamij.com/upanishad-isha-purna.htm>)

The key word *purna* is the perfect participle of the verb *pur*, which appears to be related to the English verb "to pour." It means as much as "poured out," "filled" or "full," and hence "complete," "whole," "entire," and more figuratively also "accomplished," "contented," "powerful," and so on (see Apte, 1890/2014, p. 715, and 1965/2008, pp. 14 and 139). In the following translations of the invocation, the initial and final magical words 'om' and 'shanti' are not repeated; note again the previously discussed, careful use of the terms "this" and "that" in all three versions.

All this is full. All that is full.
From fullness, fullness comes.
When fullness is taken from fullness, fullness still remains."

(Invocations to the Isha, Brihadaranyaka and Shvetashvatara Upanishads, as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, pp. 56, 93, and 158; similarly transl. by Nikhilananda, 1949, p. 200, and 2003, pp. 86 and 254; note that in the Sanskrit text, "all that" comes before "all this," as is the case in the following translations)

That is whole, this is whole.
This whole proceeds from that whole.
On taking away this whole from that whole, it remains whole.

(Invocation to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, as transl. by Müller/Navlakha, 2000, p. xix)

That is infinite, this is infinite;
From that infinite this infinite comes.
From that infinite, this infinite removed or added, infinite remains infinite.

(Invocation to the Isha Upanishad, as cited, along with a selection of other customary translations, in the Yoga site of Swami J [n.d.]

Indeed, in view of the infinite and transcendent nature of "that" world of brahman, which nevertheless inheres and conditions "this" finite but infinitely variable world of ours, need we not wonder how we may claim to understand anything without understanding the ways in which it relates to that larger, full reality of which it is a part? As both the Upanishads and Kant's ideas of reason make us understand, human reason needs this holistic notion of an all-inclusive whole as a *reference point* in relation to which it can situate its own perennially conditioned nature, its amounting to so much less than a comprehensive and objective grasp of things. At the same time, any such notion is bound to remain a problematic idea of reason. Holistic knowledge and understanding is a claim that cannot be redeemed argumentatively, whether based on logic or empirical inquiry or both. Logic tells us that we need it, but not what it is; and inquiry fails as the whole reaches beyond the empirical.

The Upanishadic thinkers understood this dilemma very clearly, some two and a half thousand years ago, before the disciplines of logic and epistemology were available to them. Their way of putting it was metaphysical and metaphorical, by means of the two great Upanishadic symbols (or metaphors) of human striving, *atman*, as the embodiment of individual self-knowledge and self-realization (a concept to which we will turn a little later), and *brahman* as the embodiment of proper universal knowledge, that is, understanding of the unity and perfection of the universe. Expressed in these terms, the problem of holism consists in the difficulty that *atman* cannot find *brahman* empirically in "this" world, through the means of inquiry, nor logically, through the means of inference. For the whole is not only beyond the empirical, it is also, as the Upanishads teach us, "one without a second," that is, unique (Chandogya, 6.2.1-2) and therefore beyond logic. There is no logic of uniqueness, no stringent inference from what we know empirically (i.e., *particulars*) to what is unique (i.e., *universals*). Both epistemologically and analytically, the universal lies beyond human knowledge. Still, reason cannot do without the notion of universal qualities and principles. It cannot renounce the quest for a full understanding of reality in such terms. Human striving for knowledge of brahman is therefore a meaningful and indispensable quest, although we should never assume that we have actually achieved it.

This, then, is the Upanishadic way of describing the methodological dilemma

with which the problem of holism confronts us. To this day it has remained a classical dilemma in many fields of philosophy such as language analysis and semiotics, hermeneutics, epistemology, and practical philosophy, and also in my work on critical systems heuristics (CSH). In the terms of the Upanishads: *atman* needs to seek knowledge of *brahman* and yet must avoid any presumption of knowledge. Or, as I like to put it in the terms of CSH: "Holistic thinking – the quest for comprehensiveness – is a meaningful *effort* but not a meaningful *claim*." (Ulrich, 2012a, p. 1236; similarly in 2012b, p. 1314 and, as applied to the moral idea, in 2013a, p. 38) This situation has motivated my call for a "critical turn" of the contemporary understanding of competent inquiry and rational practice. The essential aim then becomes ensuring sufficient critique rather than sufficient justification of theoretical or practical claims. This is feasible because, as we said above, recognizing a *lack* of knowledge can be a basis for compelling methodological provisions. The methodological consequence is a need for what I call a "critical systems approach" to research and professional practice, that is, a framework that would provide methodological support to critically comprehensive thinking or, as I originally defined it in CSH, an approach that aims to "secure at least a critical solution to the problem of practical reason" (Ulrich, 1983, pp. 25, 34-37, 177, and *passim*).

The problem (and richness) of subjectivity A second methodological implication of the metaphysical concept of *brahman* concerns the importance of *subjectivity*. Once we have understood that human thought cannot do without assuming some ultimate, unconditional ground of all that exists – the notion of a totality of conditions that exists in an unconditional, absolute, perhaps objective way – we also begin to understand how limited and subjective all our perceptions of this world of ours are bound to be, amounting at best to glimpses of that underlying larger, infinite reality. It follows that whatever knowledge of things we can aspire to possess, it will be so much less than objective, as it can just grasp aspects of that which is "really" the case. *The objective is elusive, for it would be all-inclusive.*

Ganeri (2001, p. 1) succinctly speaks of *brahman* as "the Upanishadic symbol for objectivity itself," as opposed to "the subjectivity that goes along with being situated in the world." As the *Mundaka Upanishad* puts it, *brahman* stands for that all-encompassing, infinite reality in which everything else is rooted and "through which, if it is known, everything else

becomes known" (Mundaka Upanishad, 1.1.3, as transl: by Müller, 1897/2000, p. 47, and Müller/Navlakha, 2000, p. xi; note that the latter source wrongly refers to Mundaka 1.1.4). As I would put it, the Upanishads can inspire in us the humility of accepting that there are limits to what we can hope to know and understand, due to our being situated in this world. Such awareness can encourage mutual tolerance, as well as reflective practice in the sense of paying attention to the ways in which people's individual situatedness differs and may shape their views and values. Multiple, subjective views embody a richness of views that would not be attainable otherwise. They thus have intrinsic value in the quest for comprehensiveness (seeking to better know brahman) as well as in the quest for practical excellence (seeking to better understand the options for good practice). Methodologically speaking, then, the situation is not quite as bad as it looks metaphysically. Although there are always limits to what any of us can claim to know and understand, no *specific* limits are beyond questioning and expansion; and to this end, we can always listen and talk to others.

In the Upanishadic conception of inquiry, brahman furnishes the standard for such questioning. As the Upanishads admonish us time and again, we can "really" know and understand things only inasmuch as we know and understand them in their relation to brahman. Brahman, in the metaphysical terms of the Upanishads, is the conception of a reality that, because it is "self-existent" (Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 737f), is independent of any condition external to it. It thus mirrors, in our own discourse-theoretical terms, the ideal of a self-contained account of reality that could do without any reference to conditions outside its own universe of discourse and thus would be entirely true and reliable. As an ideal, it does not lend itself to realization; but it certainly provides impetus for critical thought – about the ways our accounts of reality *fail* to be self-contained and, worse, about our usual failure to limit our claims accordingly.

This is a conception of knowledge that is important indeed for our understanding of general ideas of reason. The parallels we encountered earlier between the Upanishadic concept of brahman as an absolute, all-inclusive, and infinite reality on the one hand, and Kant's concept of a totality of conditions (or an infinite series of conditions) that reason cannot help but presuppose on the other hand, are relevant here. Both concepts confront us with unavoidable limitations of human knowledge. Both

therefore also imply the need for a discipline of self-reflection and self-limitation. But of course, there is also an important difference, in that the two traditions of thought have developed this discipline in entirely different directions – meditative spirituality and ascetism in the one tradition, critique of reason in the other. The deeper, underlying difference is that Kant makes us understand the totality of conditions as a methodological rather than metaphysical concept or, in his terms, as a transcendental rather than transcendent idea. Although a conventional, metaphysical and spiritual reading may well remain of primary importance to most people in studying the Upanishads, the mentioned parallels nevertheless suggest to me that a metaphysical reading can and should lead on to a critical study of what these ancient texts have to tell us about present-day notions of knowledge, science, and rationality, as well as about the roles we give these notions in modern societies. For example, such a reading might encourage a *critique of science* that reaches deeper than current notions of reflective practice in science and professional practice. Such critique in turn might provide new impetus for the necessary discourse on how contemporary conceptions of science-theory, research philosophy, theory of knowledge, and practical philosophy could be developed so as to overcome the crisis of rationality to which I briefly referred at the outset (Ulrich, 2013c, p. 1).

With a view to such a methodological reading and study of the Upanishads, I would argue – drawing on our previous examinations of the nature and use of ideas of reason in Parts 2 and 3 – that brahman is properly understood as a *limiting concept*, that is, as a *projected* endpoint towards which we can direct reflection on what we take to represent valid knowledge and rational practice. We have discussed the notion of ideas as limiting concepts or projected endpoints of thought earlier (see Ulrich, 2014a, p. 7 and note 5, and 2014b, pp. 23-28); suffice it to recall that reason needs such notions as reference points for its critical business, however problematic they are bound to remain due to their exceeding the reach of possible knowledge. They thus pose a double challenge to reason. Reason needs to employ them for critical ends while at the same time learning to handle them critically, that is, to keep a critical stance towards any claims based on their use. Again, as with the striking parallels we observed before, I see no essential methodological difference in this regard between the Upanishads' brahman and Kant's ideas of reason. Consequently, a further conjecture offers itself: we might try to embed Upanishadic reflection on knowledge as inspired by the notion of

brahman – "brahmanic reflection" as it were – in the same kind of double or cyclical movement of critical thought with which we earlier associated the pragmatic use or "approximation" of Kant's ideas of reason, equally understood as limiting concepts. The idea is that in this way we might gain a deeper understanding of both, the movement of critical thought in question as well as the methodological implications of the "brahmanic reflection" just suggested. So much for a brief outlook; we will take up this idea in a later essay of this series. At present we are not yet prepared for such a discussion, as we first need to familiarize ourselves with the two other Upanishadic ideas that we selected for examination, *atman* and *jagat*.

"Atman" A second major theme is *atman*, a counter-concept to *brahman* inasmuch as it focuses on the individual that seeks to know or experience brahman, rather than on brahman itself. Atman stands for the subjective side of the quest for knowing brahman. If brahman is the Upanishadic symbol for objectivity, atman is the symbol for subjectivity. In the terms we used in the introductory essay, atman embodies the emerging *knowing subject* of the Upanishads, whose search for understanding what is real and reliable in this ever-changing world – where to find that basic, unchanging reality called brahman – leads it to discover its own consciousness and self-reflection. "Atman, or the Self, is the consciousness, the knowing subject, within us." (Nikhilananda, 1949, p. 52). As the Upanishadic thinkers understood centuries before the early thinkers of the Occident (e.g., the pre-Socratic philosophers of nature, such as Anaxagoras and Democritus, and later Plato and Aristotle), the key to understanding our (for ever imperfect) grasp of the objective world lies in ourselves, in our consciousness and, as a contemporary Western perspective might want to add, in our individual and collective unconscious or subconscious (see Jung, 1966, 1968a). Early on the ancient Indian sages understood that both brahman and atman – the objective and the subjective principle – are indispensable notions for reflecting on the sources and nature of human knowledge or error, even if both notions are ultimately beyond human grasp. Likewise, they recognized that neither notion is independent of the other; each manifests itself in the other but cannot be reduced to it. "The Absolute of the Upanishads manifests itself as the subject as well as the object and transcends them both." (Sharma, 2000, p. 25).

Root meanings The word *atman* quite obviously contains the Sanskrit root of the contemporary German verb *atmen* = to breathe; compare the German masculine noun *der Atem* = breath, a word that in contemporary German is still also used in metaphoric or spiritual expressions such as *der Atem Gottes*, meaning the creative presence of God's spirit. The Sanskrit *atman* in turn appears to be derived not only from the verbal root *at* (= go constantly, walk, run, obtain, as in *Atem*; cf. Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 12;) but also from the verbal root *an* (= to breathe, respire, gasp, live, move, go, as in the Latin noun *animus* = spirit or soul; cf. Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 24). These two root meanings come together in the act of breathing in and out. In addition, the origin of the word *atman* appears to be associated with the verbal roots *ad* (= to eat, consume, devour; cf. Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 17) and *ap* (= to obtain, reach; as a substantive root = work, in Vedic use also air, water, river; cf. Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 47).

Note that for phonological or declensional reasons, the initial "a" in *atman* is suppressed in some uses, yielding *'tman*. This happens frequently when the term appears in compound words following a vowel. Employing the phonetically reduced form along with the complete form may help in consulting the Sanskrit dictionaries, but otherwise it need not concern us here. **Table 2** lists the entries of Monier-Williams (1899) for both forms, drawing on all editions listed in the bibliography and particularly also on the facsimile editions. Readers wishing to verify these entries should be aware, however, that the on-line search tools of the Cologne Project (1997/2008 and 2013/14) and Monier-Williams et al. (2008) currently only list *tman* and under this entry do not include all the meanings given in the original dictionary for *atman*, which is why I still found it necessary to consult the facsimile editions. Easier to use and more complete in this respect are some of the other Sanskrit dictionaries available online, particularly Apte (1965/2008) and, with some reservations regarding completeness, Böhtlingk and Roth (1855, p. 3-3f) and Böhtlingk and Schmidt (1879/1928, p. 3-045). Even so, for reasons of consistency, Table 2, like the previous Table 1 (for "brahman") and the later Table 3 (for "jagat"), relies on Monier-Williams and focuses on the root meanings of "atman" given by this major source; some of Apte's additional translations will be mentioned in the subsequent text. As in the case of Table 1, I have again highlighted some of the meanings of special interest to us.

Table 2: Selected meanings of [a]tman

Source: Monier-Williams, 1899, pp. 12 (*at*), 24 (*an*); 135 (*atman*) and 456 (*tman*),
abridged and simplified

आत्मन्

atman, atmán, m[asculine gender].

(variously derived from *an*, to breathe, live; *at*, to move, go constantly, walk, run;
vA, to blow; cf. *tmán*),
the breath.

essence, nature, character, peculiarity (often at the end of a compound, e.g.
karmA^tman). (variously derived from *an*, to breathe; *at*, to move; vA, to blow; cf.
tmán) the breath.

the soul, principle of life and sensation.

the individual soul, self, abstract individual.

the person or whole body considered as one and opposed to the separate members of the
body.

(at the end of a compound) "the understanding, intellect, mind" (cf. *naSTA^tman*,
deprived of mind or sense, p. 532).

the highest personal principle of life, *Brahma* (cf. *paramA^tman*) .

effort, (= *dhRti*), firmness.

the sun, fire.

tman, tmán m[asculine gender].

(= *atmán*) the vital breath.

one's own person , self; 'tman after e, or o for *atman*.

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Derived meanings Apte's (1965/2008) *Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* lists the following (among other) additional uses of the term "atman," all of which relate to both cognitive and emotional qualities, to the mind *and* the soul: "thinking faculty, the faculty of thought and reason" (p. 323); "spirit, vitality, courage" (p. 323); "mental quality" (p. 323); further, in derived and compound phrases, atman also stands for qualities or efforts such as "striving to get knowledge (as an ascetic), seeking spiritual knowledge" (p. 324); "dependent on oneself or on his own mind, self-dependence" (p. 324); "self-control, self-government" (p. 325); "knowing one's own self (family etc.), knowledge of the soul, spiritual knowledge" (p. 325); "practicing one's own duties or occupation, one's own power or ability, to the best of one's power" (p. 325); and, apparently accompanying such qualities, forms of personal conduct such as "self-purification" (p. 325), but also "self-praise" and "self-restraint" (p. 325).

Personal reading The etymological root meaning of *atman*, so much is clear, refers to the activity of breathing – the vital breath – as a source of vitality that keeps us alive and moving and also allows us to grow and develop as individuals, to unfold our nature and essential character (compare

the compound word *jivatman*, also spelled *givatman*, from *jivá* = "living, existing, alive" and *tman*, thus yielding "the living or personal or individual soul," cf. Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 422f, facsimile edn. only). Atman is thus also the source of our becoming what we have the potential to be spiritually and intellectually, if only we undertake the required effort of learning, by seeking to know brahman and thereby also to better know ourselves, that is, the individual *self* of which both our *soul* and our *intellect* are constitutive.

Müller's (1879, e.g., pp. xxx-xxxii) preferred translation of *atman* is indeed the "individual self" or simply the "self," meaning the essential core of a human subject that lies behind the empirical individual as it manifests itself in the phenomenal world, the *aham* (cf. the German *ich* or the Latin *ego*, "I"):

Beyond the *aham* or ego, with all its accidents and limitations, such as sex, sense, language, country, and religion, the Indian sages perceived, from a very early time, the *atman* or the self, independent of all such accidents. (Müller, 1879, p. xxx, added italics).

Atman, the individual self, thus distinguishes itself from both the empirical ego (*aham*) on the one hand and the universal or highest self (*brahman*) on the other hand. Atman is neither *aham* nor *brahman*; rather, it is *on the way* from *aham* to *brahman*, developing its contingent, empirical self towards its essential, divine self. With respect to the latter, Müller emphasizes that *atman* is always "a merely temporary reflex of the Eternal Self" (1879, p. xxxii; cf. his full discussion on pp. xxviii-xxxii). Atman's fundamental task is to *realize itself* – its *individual* self – in the double sense of achieving awareness (recognizing it) and growth (developing it), so that this individual self can become a fuller reflex of that higher, universal Self of which it is only an imperfect reflection.

The core topic of the Upanishads, as I understand it, is accordingly "to explain the true relation between *brahman*, the supreme being, and [*atman*,] the soul of man" (Müller, 1904/2013, p. 20). Atman's self-realization, in the double sense just explained, is gained through the effort to get to know brahman. The Upanishads therefore also refer to brahman as *paramatman* (or *parama-atman*, from *paramá* = most distant, highest, best, most excellent, superior, with all the heart, and *tman*, yielding "the supreme spirit," Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 588): *paramatman* is the ideal towards which *jivatman*, the living self, is to strive, a process of realizing one's

individual nature and potential that has as its endpoint the convergence of atman with brahman, or atman's becoming *atman-brahman*. When this happens (in the ideal, that is), atman has found "its *very* self," "that [self] which *should* be perceived" or realized (Olivelle's apt translation of "atman" in the *Mandukya Upanishad*, see 1996, p. 289f, see verses 7, 8 and 12; italics added).

The distinction, and ideal convergence, of atman and brahman is also related to the fundamental notion in Hindu thought of a perpetual cycle of rebirth and transmigration of souls (*samsara*): atman can only free itself from *samsara* by moving closer to brahman, that is, by realizing its own highest self. In connection with the notion of *samsara*, atman's self is "the eternal core of the personality that after death either transmigrates to a new life or attains release (*moksha*) from the bonds of existence" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013a). Which one of the two options will come true depends on the degree to which atman realizes its individual self in terms of both awareness and growth.

Atman or the search for personal growth We are, then, talking about the *individual self as-it-has-the-potential-to-be* rather than *as-it-actually-is*; about a person's *vital* self; about the ultimate source of its being spiritually, emotionally and intellectually alive and growing. Hamilton (2001, p. 28 and passim) similarly speaks of atman as embodying "the nature of one's *essential* self or soul," and Ganeri (2007, p. 3) of a "*healthy* self" towards which atman is to strive. Partly similar notions of personal growth are quite familiar to the Western tradition of thought. I am thinking of Carl Rogers' (1961) *process of becoming* and particularly of C.G. Jung's (1968b) *process of individuation*, a process through which a person's unconscious and conscious become one in the Self, whereby the latter concept (the Self) is understood as the archetype of psychic wholeness or totality. The difference is that in the Hindu tradition, this process reaches beyond all the limitations and contingencies of a person's life and takes on a truly cosmic dimension: the individual soul or consciousness is expected to become one with the whole universe *as if* individual awareness could ever include the whole of reality or, in Vedanta terms, as if *atman* could ever be one with *brahman* so as indeed to become *atman-brahman*.

Atman or the quest for realizing the ideal in the real *Atman's striving to*

become one with brahman: what a great image for the eternal tension between realism and idealism in the human quest for coming to terms with the world and, inseparable from it, for becoming (or realizing) oneself! Remarkably, in this Upanishadic image the tension can be resolved in favor of a meaningful convergence – of the human condition as it is and human development as it might be. Such convergence is conceivable in the Upanishadic framework as it sees the ultimate ground of the person (one's self-concept) in close interaction with the cosmic principles (brahman) that pervade the universe and thus also shape our awareness of the world and of ourselves. The tension between the real and the ideal is thus reconciled in the notion of a fundamental union of individual (or subjective) and universal (or objective) principles.

Kant's later attempt, in the first *Critique*, to explain how the human mind can grasp and understand the world at all, or in his terms, how the mind's *a priori* categories can be constitutive of *empirical* knowledge, lead him to a similar solution: the answer must be that there exists an ultimate convergence of the human mind's internal structure and principles with those of the universe (see Kant's highly differentiated analysis in the "Analytic of Principles," 1787, B169-315, esp. B193-197). The principles governing the world must be the same as those governing the human mind! For purely methodological reasons, Kant is thus compelled to postulate an ultimate unity of the *cognitive* conditions that account for the *intelligibility* of the world with the *ontological* conditions that account for its *reality*, a postulate he calls the "highest principle of all synthetic judgments" (1787, B197):

We assert that the conditions of the *possibility of experience* in general are likewise conditions of the *possibility of the objects of experience*, and that for this reason they have objective validity in a synthetic *a priori* judgment. (Kant, 1787, B197)

If as humans we can grasp *reality* at all, infinite as it is and reaching beyond our experience, it is because it is *already in us*, as an intrinsic part of our cognitive apparatus. In the language of the Vedanta: *atman* can hope at least partly to grasp the universal reality that is called "brahman" because *brahman* is already in atman's soul, is part of its essential nature. "The real behind empirical nature is the universal spirit within." (Mohanty, 2000, p. 2). *Atmavidya* (the search for understanding oneself) and *brahmavidya* (the search for understanding universal reality) go hand in hand.

From cultivated understanding to cultivated practice Shifting the focus

from the realm of theoretical (speculative) reason to that of practical (moral) reason, I find a similar parallelism between the deepest ideas of the traditions of Western rational ethics and ancient Indian thought. Just as Kant's "enlarged thought," the rational effort of taking into account the implications of one's subjective maxim of action for all others and thus to cultivate a *sensus communis* (see the earlier discussion in Ulrich, 2009b, p. 10f, and 2009d, p. 38), converges with the quest for cultivating one's moral self, so cultivated understanding of the world and individual self-cultivation also converge in the ancient Indian tradition. In Vedanta terms as well as in Buddhist terms, which in this regard do not differ, "philosophical inquiry and the practices of truth are also *arts of the soul*, ways of cultivating impartiality, self-control, steadiness of mind, toleration, and non-violence." (Ganeri, 2007, p. 4, added italics).

But of course, effort and achievement are not the same thing. We are talking here about an *ongoing process* of cultivating one's knowledge, character, and practice, rather than about an accomplishment. Despite the promise of *brahman's* residing in the individual, *atman* is only and for ever *on the way* to self-knowledge and self-realization. The situation resembles that of a student challenged by the teacher to never stop learning; or, in the previously quoted terms of Müller, of a pupil who is called upon to learn to know his *Self* rather than just *himself*, that is, to understand his individual self as "a merely temporary reflex of the Eternal Self" (Müller, 1879, p. xxxii). Once we realize that self-knowledge (*atmavidya*) is quite impossible without knowledge of that highest expression of Self called brahman (*brahmavidya*), and *vice-versa*, the challenge is unavoidable:

The highest aim of all thought and study with the Brahman of the Upanishads was to recognize his own self as a mere limited reflection of the Highest Self, to know his self in the Highest Self, and through that knowledge to return to it, and regain his identity with it. Here to know was to be, to know the Atman was to be the Atman, and the reward of that highest knowledge after death was freedom from new births, or immortality.

That Highest Self which had become to the ancient Brahmans the goal of all their mental efforts, was looked upon at the same time as the starting-point of all phenomenal existence, the root of the world, the only thing that could truly be said to be, to be real and true. As the root of all that exists, the Atman was identified with the Brahman. (Müller, 1879, p. xxx)

Accordingly, as Müller sums up the gist of the *Upanishads*, the question that may guide us in reading these bewildering, mythical, partly dark and almost unintelligible, yet partly also bright and illuminating texts is this:

The question is, whether there is or whether there is not, hidden in every one of the sacred books, something that could lift up the human heart from this earth to

a higher world, something that could make man feel the omnipresence of a higher Power, something that could make him shrink from evil and incline to good, something to sustain him in the short journey through life, with its bright moments of happiness, and its long hours of terrible distress. (Müller, 1879, p. xxxviii)

The human being's striving beyond the fragmentary universe within which it moves in everyday thought and practice, towards something deeper or higher, towards something that could "lift the heart up"; that's what well-understood self-knowledge (*atmavidya*) is all about from a Vedantic perspective. It leads us directly to the third selected idea that I find so interesting in the Upanishads' account of the general (or universal) in all human cognition and practice, the concept of *jagat*.

"Jagat" At first glance, it may look as if this one were the easiest of the three ideas to grasp, as the term is still used today in many regional Indian languages for referring to the experiential world in which we live. On closer inspection though, it is perhaps the most complex and interesting of the three concepts, at least from a methodological (rather than spiritual) point of view. It provides a major example of how Upanishadic thought is able to deal constructively and critically with the eternal tension (or dialectic) in human thought and practice mentioned above, between the real (empirical, particular) and the ideal (conceptual, universal) – the idealist and the realist sides of our grasp of reality. It obliges us, as it were, to pay attention to the way we construct our universes of thought and action as varying combinations of realist and idealist elements, and thus prepares the ground for what I suggest to call critically contextual thinking. But let us see.

Root meanings The Sanskrit root term contained in the second syllable of "jagat" is *ga*, which refers to moving, going, not too different from the English *go*; whence comes the Sanskrit verb *gam*, = to go, move, or approach; to arrive at, to accomplish or attain (see Wilson, 1819/2011, p. 282). The prefix *ja* in the first syllable means as much as "born or descended from, produced or caused by, born or produced in or at or upon, growing in, living at"; hence also "son of" or "father of," or "belonging to, connected with, peculiar to" (Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 407). Further, it can also mean "speedy, swift" (the only meaning given by Wilson, 1819/2011, p. 336, whereas Monier-Williams lists it almost last of the many meanings he gives) or "victorious, eaten" (Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 407), two meanings that point to the term's connotation of chase or hunt (*Jagd* in German). The

prefix may also be related to the similar term *ya*, which among other meanings refers to that which moves or to "who goes, a goer, a mover" or also "air, wind" (Wilson, 1819/2011, p. 677, similarly Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 838). So *jagat* is everything that is moving or movable, undergoing variation, in flux, "especially in the sense that no fixed description of it will ever be correct" (D.P. Dash, 2013a). Here is, once again, a representative selection of meanings from the Monier-Williams *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (**Table 3**):

Table 3: Selected meanings of jagat

Source: Monier-Williams, 1899, pp. 108 and 408, abridged and simplified

<p>जगत् <i>jagat, jágat</i> m[asculine] f[feminine] n[euter] gender. (from <i>gam</i>, moving, movable, locomotive, living)</p>
<p><i>jagat, jágat</i> m[asculine gender]. air, wind. pl[ural use]. people , mankind.</p>
<p><i>jagat, jágat</i> n[euter] gender. that which moves or is alive, men and animals, animals as opposed to men, men. the world, esp. this world, earth. people, mankind. the plants (or flour [ground grain] as coming from plants) the site of a house the world, universe du[al number]. heaven and the lower world pl[ural use]. the worlds (= [<i>ja</i>]gat-traya ["three jagats"])</p>
<p><i>jagad-atman, jagadAtman</i> m[asculine gender]. [also <i>jagat-atman</i>, e.g., Apte (1890/2014, p. 503)] world-breath. wind; world-soul. the Supreme Spirit [lit. = world spirit].</p>

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Against the background of the discussion thus far, it is interesting to note that *jagat* refers not only to the "world," "earth" or "universe" in general but can also take the specific meaning of "this world [of ours]" (Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 408). *Jagat* is the world as it *manifests* itself to the individual (atman) as a perceived or imagined reality, a perception that is in constant flux and does not usually capture the full, objective reality (brahman). Further, in addition to the manifest physical world, *jagat* may also refer specifically to "the world of the soul, [or of an individual's] body" (Apte,

1965/2008, p. 722; cf. 1890/2014, p. 503). Jagat can thus refer to *different realms* of the universe, such as heaven and earth. The compound nouns *trijagat* and *jagat-traya* designate the Vedantic conception of three worlds, either as "(1) the heaven, the atmosphere and the earth" or as "(2) the heaven, the earth, and the lower world" (Apte, 1965/2008. p. 789; similarly Böhlingk and Roth, 1855, p. 3-428, and Böhlingk and Schmidt, 1879/1928, p. 3-49). As a last hint, Apte also lists *jagat* as a grammatical object of the verbal noun *nisam* (lit. = not speaking, silent, observing), which refers to the act of "seeing, beholding, [having] sight [of]"; accordingly the phrase *nisam jagat* stands for "observing the [visible] world" and, as a result, having a certain "sight" of the world (p. 924, cf. 1890//2014, p. 638), a world view.

Derived meanings: the rich etymology of "jagat" While the Sanskrit-English dictionaries on which I have drawn have their strength in a scholarly documentation of actual occurrences of Sanskrit terms in the ancient literature, they are less strong when it comes to explaining how old Sanskrit terms have found their way into the contemporary vocabulary of Indo-European and other languages. "Jagat" is such a term. It continues to be used in several Asian languages, including Modern Standard Hindi, in meanings related to land, earth, world, or universe, with a number of different derived connotations.²¹⁾ Likewise, in the European languages (esp. in Dutch and German) one can find numerous contemporary words and entire word families that appear to be related to the ancient Sanskrit *jagat*. They often go back to the Old-Germanic root *jag*, which apparently contains the Sanskrit root terms *ja* and *gam* (as explained above) and means as much as "moving fast, chasing." Here are three examples of such word families, all of which are of particular interest to our present discussion.

(1) The German noun *Jagd* (= the hunt) derives directly from the Middle High German noun *jaget* or *jagat*. This etymological connection makes the combination of the two above-listed, at first glance unrelated, root meanings of the prefix *ja* understandable, of "speedy, swift" along with "victorious, eaten." Interestingly, the German noun originally referred not only to the activity of hunting but also to the parties involved or admitted (a meaning it still has today, although it is now rarely used in this sense), as well as to the area in which hunting was permitted. The corresponding German verb is *jagen* (= to hunt, figuratively also to move fast or to chase something or somebody). Similar forms exist in other North-European languages (e.g. the

Dutch verb *jagen*, from Middle Dutch *jaghen*, Old Dutch *jagon*; likewise Swedish *jaga* or Swiss-German *jage*). The Dutch noun for Jagd is *jacht* (from Middle Dutch *jaght*), which is obviously related to the German and Dutch term for a sailing yacht, *Jacht* (= yacht, originally a fast moving boat or "hunting boat").

(2) The Swiss-German noun *Hag* (= fence, originally meaning as much as a thorn hedge that encloses a piece of land or forest) goes back to the Old High German *hac* and further to the Old Germanic (Proto-Germanic) *hagatusjon*, with many derivatives such as *hagaz* (= able, skilled), *hag* or *haga* (= to beat, push, thrust), and *häkse* (= a witch or hag, cf. Middle English *hagge*, from Old English *haegtes*; Dutch *heks*, German *Hexe*). Although the link is not definitively proven, both the form and the meaning of these and other words with the root term *hag* are strikingly close to *jag[at]*; they all connote some aspects of fast movement or hunting (e.g., chasing, stinging, hitting, capturing, fencing in). These connotations are still very apparent, for example, in the contemporary German verbs *hacken* (= to chop, hack; also *abhacken* = to chop off) and *einhalten* (= to hedge, to fence in), as well as in the German nouns *Hecke* (= a hedge, related to the Old English *haga* = an enclosure, a fenced-in area, and to the Middle English *hawe* as in hawthorn) and *Gehege* (= an enclosure, preserve, a fenced area of natural preservation or also an artificial habitat for animals as in the zoo).

(3) In other derivatives, the root meanings of chasing, capturing, enclosing, and delimiting take on a strong connotation of protection, as in the German verb *hegen* (orig. = to hedge), which now means as much as to care for, look after, cultivate, or foster (as in the phrase *hegen und pflegen*, to lavish care and attention on somebody or something). Figuratively used it means, for example, to nurture a hope (*eine Hoffnung hegen*), to entertain an expectation or a doubt (*eine Erwartung hegen, einen Zweifel hegen*), or to pursue an intention or plan (*eine Absicht hegen, einen Plan hegen*). Another derivation appears to be *Hain*, an old-fashioned German noun that is now chiefly used in poetic language for a grove but which originally just meant a piece of land surrounded by trees or bushes, yielding a natural delimitation for an orchard or garden, a resting place, or a small farm or other kind of dwelling. This explains why the root *hag* is also still frequently found today as a component in the names of plants that are characteristic of such places (e.g. *Hagedorn* = hawthorn, from Old English *hagathorn*), or *Hagebutte* =

rose hip), as well as in many old place names (e.g., *Hagen* and *Im obern Hag* in Germany, *Den Haag* in the Netherlands, or *Hagnau* in Switzerland).

To judge from the numerous etymological sources that I have consulted, ranging from the *Oxford English Dictionary* to *Wiktionary* for English and from the *Duden* to the *Kluge* and the *Wahrig* dictionaries for German, it appears that the link between *jagat* and the first-mentioned word family around *Jagd* is firmly established, whereas the precise history of the modern words mentioned under points (2) and (3) lies partly in the dark. Even so, the extent to which the root meanings of these terms agree with those of the ancient Sanskrit word *jagat* is striking. We may sum up these root meanings as follows:

- (1) the activity of *movement* or *chase*; an object that moves or undergoes *change*;
- (2) a piece of *land* or *site* of a dwelling, or that which delimits it;
- (3) an element of *care*, attention, interest or cultivation; this world of ours or a delimited part of it about which we care.²²⁾

A second observation that I find striking is this. As a common denominator, all three root meanings have to do with the core notion of something bounded or limited that changes and can be changed but which is also being cared for – a core notion that I associate with my methodological interest, in my work on critical systems heuristics (CSH), in the role of *boundary judgments* and hence, of boundary discourse and boundary critique as tools for cultivated understanding (for an introduction see, e.g., Ulrich 1996, 2006a, 2001, and 2005). However, for the time being, let us stick to the etymology of *jagat*.

Personal reading Considering the various meanings of *jagat*, I conclude that it may stand for virtually any *object-realm* of experience or awareness (and, in the case of humans, also of thought, discourse, and action) that constitutes the "world" or "universe" within which an individual's attention moves at any specific time. Characteristic of this world is that it is "moving" or changing, in the double sense that it takes on *variable* forms or states and thus may also be seen from *multiple* perspectives, so that there is no definitive description of it. Equally characteristic is that it represents a particular, *partial* set of the total universe of phenomena that in principle could come into sight or might be the focus of attention, and that (to use

Müller's earlier-cited description of atman's self as distinguished from the universal or higher Self) it is only a "temporary reflex" of the full reality behind the considered phenomena. Moreover, as we just observed, an active element of *bounding* (i.e., drawing a boundary, = making a distinction in the form of some *boundary judgments*) on the part of a human observer plays a role in each of the three word families that we have considered. The basic cognitive (logical, observational, linguistic) act involved is that of making a distinction between "within" and "without."

This active element suggests that one of the associations that go with "jagat" concerns a subject's *authorship* and/or *ownership* of it. Whatever jagat we are talking about, it is always some *subject's jagat*; it is the world as an individual perceives and experiences it in its current situation. In a sense, even animals – all living beings, not only humans – are authors of their jagat; we call it "habitat" (or living space) in the case of animals and "daily life world" (or realm of experience, universe of discourse, world view, etc.) in the case of people. The subject, whether an animal or a person, can to a certain extent choose, change or modify its habitat. Humans, as subjects endowed with reason, cannot avoid thinking about and questioning their perception of and situation in the world.

As a consequence of that individual authorship, but also of the infinite variety of things and aspects that make up "the world" – the total universe of things we might want to consider as parts of our individual worlds – there is an element of *selection* involved. We cannot usually do justice to all and every circumstance that might potentially be of interest. By implication, in talking to others we have to make it clear what parts or aspects of "the world" we are concerned or talking about; as a result of exchange with others, we may revise our individual jagat. Atman's view or conception of the world, like that of its inmost self, is always only a "temporary reflex" of the full reality. Further, due to this moving and changing character, the concept of *jagat* also connotes the idea of an ongoing *process* of change in which a subject's jagat can take on different states or stages of development and appreciation.

As I suggest to understand the term *jagat*, it connotes all these mentioned aspects of its being a variable object-domain; its being authored and owned by an individual; its having the selected and temporary nature of a subject's

world; its being a possible object of reflection and learning, revision and development. As knowing subjects, we find ourselves in the situation of *atman*: we are challenged to develop not only our awareness of self – "the knowing subject within us" (Nikhilananda, 1949, p. 52) – but also that of the world around us, the world within we live, our individual *jagat*. We can "realize" the *jagat*-like nature of our world in the double sense of both making ourselves aware of it and, consequently, developing it.

From an epistemological and methodological point of view, we may structure these various connotations of "jagat" a bit more systematically into *three basic types of reference to the world* involved in observing the world, in thinking and talking about it, and in acting in it:

(i) *Jagat* refers to some *object(s) of cognition* (the perceived) – "the world within which a subject moves," understood as a *variable object-realm of perception and awareness*. Characteristically, there is no definitive description of the object-domain or, to put it differently, there are no stable objects of cognition, due to the fluent and perspectival character of what can be known and said about this world of ours. Also characteristically, that which can be known or said, despite its unstable character, is of concern to some individual(s) in some context of ordinary existence and practice. Another way to describe the nature of this first type of reference to the world is by pointing to its *contextual* character: we perceive and talk of objects depending on the contexts in which we find ourselves or about which we care.

In the case of an animal, the *jagat* in question will be its natural habitat, perhaps also the larger ecosystem of which this habitat is a part. In the case of humans, a typical object domain referred to as "jagat" may originally (i.e., in the history of the term) have been a dwelling or the site of a house where people lived, or a fenced area of land where cattle was kept or crops were grown. Later on larger object domains may have moved into focus, say, a larger geographical region or a social context shared by a group of individuals or, in a more religious context, the three *jagats* of earth, heaven, and the lower world, and thus ultimately also the whole cosmos or any section of the real-world of interest at a specific moment. Common to any human *jagat* is that it is always *someone's jagat* and is closely related to the concerned subjects' sense of identity or "self."

(ii) *Jagat* refers to some *subject(s) of cognition* (the perceiver) – "that which moves and changes" (e.g., its location, appearance, or view), understood as a *bearer of knowledge and awareness*, perhaps also as a source of ideas, insights and errors, as well as an agent, in its moving within the object-domain in question.²³⁾ Characteristically this subject, through its changing states of awareness as well as its changing needs and interests, is the author and owner (Sanskrit = *natha* or *naatha*, meaning "protector, patron, possessor, owner, lord," cf. Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 534, as well as "author," cf. Sanskrit and Tamil Dictionaries, 2005) of its world, the specific universe within which its perceptions, thoughts, and actions move. The object of cognition referred to under (i) above thus becomes the subject's self-created *universe of discourse* (or universe of thought and action), an ever-changing, self-delimited context of interest or concern within which people move as observers, speakers, or agents.

The human subject, thus conceived as observer, narrator, or agent, becomes *jagannath* (from *jagat* and *natha*), "the author of the considered or narrated world" – a concept that we still encounter in India today, for example, in the form of the masculine first name *Jagannath* as well as, in the Indian state of Odisha (formerly Orissa) and in other Indian states, as the name of a Hindu deity (a title of Krishna, the eighth avatar of Vishnu), then meaning as much as "the lord (or protector) of the universe." The term "jagannath" is also at the origin of the English loanword *juggernaut*, which according to my constant companion, the *Complete English Oxford Dictionary*, refers to an "idol of this deity at Puri, Orissa, annually dragged in procession on an enormous car, under the wheels of which many devotees are said to have formerly thrown themselves to be crushed" (see the picture on the right hand; source: in the public domain, made available by the [Project Gutenberg](#)). In contemporary language it now also denotes any particularly large vehicle or machine and is synonymous with "behemoth" or "Moloch."



The double association of *jagat* with *jagannath* and *juggernaut* is not without its dangers. While it is apt to remind us of *jagat's* belonging to some

author, and thus of its subjective and creative, self-authored and dynamic nature as "the moving universe within which we move," it also abets a one-sidedly religious reading (especially in popular reception). Its use in the ancient scriptures is then easily misunderstood to refer to the divine author of "that" world only (i.e., to God or some ancient Hindu deity), rather than also (and perhaps primarily) to the *human authors of "this" world*. Such an understanding of *jagat* risks obscuring its philosophical and methodological relevance, which I see in its drawing our attention to the inevitably contextual character of the world as an object of human cognition. An example is provided by the *Isha Upanishad*, one of the principal Upanishads associated with the Yajur Veda, which customarily is translated in such a one-sidedly religious way that the significance of its central, emphatic reference to "jagat" gets all but lost (we will discuss this example in the next essay).

(iii) Finally, by implication, *jagat* also refers to a *state of cognition* (the perception) – "the state of awareness of the world, which an unreflective subject wrongly considers as *the* world." Characteristically, again, there is no stable state of awareness; for awareness is always an intermediate state in an ongoing process of transformation. *Jagat* thus stands for a current state of consciousness and understanding in terms of which a human subject perceives and describes its world *provisionally* but which, as soon as we take it for granted, risks being false or arbitrary or in any case fails to capture the possible development of both the subject and the object of cognition. It is, to use Müller's (1879, p. xxxii) phrase once more, but a "temporary reflex" of the full reality that as such cannot be an object of human cognition. Hence, whatever we choose to say about the world is bound to be insufficient and unreliable, as is any one perspective or universe of discourse we rely upon for defining situations and acting in them. A devastating but compelling insight that is also captured in a famous Vedantic aphorism, ascribed to **Adi Shankara**, the major 8th/9th century commentator of the Upanishads and founder of the **Advaita Vedanta** school of Vedanta thought (a school of thought that emphasizes the unity of all reality and the ultimate convergence of *atman* and *brahman*):

brahman satyam, jagat mithya.

"Brahman is the real reality, the world is deceptive."

(Bowker, 1997, p. 164, and 2000, p. 96)

The verbal root *mith* means "to unite, pair, couple, meet (as friend or antagonist), alternate, engage in altercation, dash together" (Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 816). As used here it can be translated as meaning "to conjoin" or "configure" (J. Dash, 2015). The compound *mithya* (= what is wrongly construed as being true; cf. Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 817), a word obviously related to the Greek *mythos*, reminds us that such configurations or meetings can go wrong and can deceive us about the true nature of things (*satya[m]* = what is really true or works in practice; cf. Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 1135). In whatever ways we may perceive and describe the world, they tend to be deceptive because they capture momentary, unstable and changing views in space and time only, as distinguished from what would be genuinely and invariably true, that is, insights that are valid and reliable beyond all spatio-temporal contingencies. Experience is transient, true knowledge remains. Descriptions are unstable, as they represent a choice. Adequate knowledge and understanding must thus discern between what is a-spatio-temporal or *nitya* (= constant, invariable, innate; cf. Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 547) and what is spatio-temporal or *anitya* (= transient, unstable, uncertain; cf. Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 29). So one should never take one's experience in space and time – one's experiential world – for all there is. When we forget this basic insight – and it is indeed easy, often also convenient, to forget it –, the result is *mithya*, that is, deception.

Jagat mithya: in search of the real world The point of *jagat mithya*, then, is not that the world is unreal, a mere illusion (a metaphysical misreading). Rather, the point is a methodological one. Let's never forget, it admonishes us, that although the world we experience often appears to be "given," it is not given at all; for all our knowledge and understanding of the real world is invariably and unavoidably limited by our changing viewpoints and projections – the only constant in the variability of the experiential. So we don't just experience the real world, we construct it. Hence, we tend to perceive and describe the reality of *our own* experiential world rather than of "the" world. The more we progress on the path of "realizing" brahman (*brahman satyam*), the more we will also understand the constructed character and thus the potential deceptiveness of the "real world," that is, of our particular universes of discourse and action (*jagat mithya*). Adequate knowledge and understanding must therefore reach out beyond these apparently given universes, towards the larger conceptions and postulations

that shape them. Accordingly, in methodological rather than metaphysical terms, we might capture Shankara's admonishment in these two reminders:

One perceives the reality of one's own world.

and

One thinks the thoughts of one's own universe of thought.

Or, to put it in the terms of this series of essays:

We see and think in contexts that we make up ourselves.

Interestingly, in Shankara's aphorism it is explicitly *jagat* which is to be understood as such a configuration. To "realize" (understand, reconsider, develop) the true nature of the *jagats* in which we think, act, and live, we need (in the language of this series of essays) to bring together the visible, contextual foreground of our experiential world with the invisible, decontextualized background of general ideas. Only together can they constitute adequate knowledge and understanding. The good news is that we can choose to heed Shankara's admonishment and to avoid the habit (or temptation) of taking our or anyone's personal *jagats* for granted \neg the Upanishadic way of developing our skills as knowing and acting subjects.

Concluding comment We are reaching the end of this introductory analysis of the three selected Upanishadic ideas, *brahman*, *atman*, and *jagat*. Is there any concise way to sum it up? If so, perhaps the most noteworthy finding consists in the rather striking parallels that we have encountered between these Upanishadic ideas and the "Western" *ideas of reason* that Kant examined most profoundly in his critique of reason, ideas that remain indispensable today with a view to ensuring to reason what may be its three most basic virtues: unity of thought, morality of action, and rationality of argumentation.²⁴⁾ The parallels in question include:

(a) the *general* character of these ideas: they guide us beyond the limits of the apparently given, empirical world; due to their decontextualizing thrust, they compel us to recognize and question the self-constructed limitations of our perceptions of the world and of our related universes of discourse and action;

(b) their *unavoidable* but simultaneously *problematic* character: reason cannot do without them, but at the same time it cannot demonstrate that they have any objective validity and thus it also cannot rely on them for validating

the generalizations they suggest to us;

(c) their *unconditional* character: they refer us to the notion of an unconditioned totality (or a complete series) of conditions, a notion that is implied in all sufficient explanation or understanding of things yet exceeds the limits of possible knowledge; which is to say, all these ideas confront us with the limitations of human knowledge and reason;

(d) their character as *limiting* concepts: they embody projected endpoints of thought that we need for systematic thinking, although we can only approximate but never reach these endpoints;

(e) their confronting us with a fundamental *tension* between the demands of reason and what it can achieve in reality: they remind us of the perennial clash of idealism and realism in human thought and practice;

(f) their anticipated convergence of the *real* (empirical) and the *ideal* (universal) in the constitution of human knowledge: inquiry into the nature of the world cannot avoid postulating that the *ontological* conditions that account for its *reality* and the *cognitive* conditions that account for its *intelligibility* coincide;

(g) and finally, their doubly *challenging* character with a view to critical inquiry and practice: reason needs to learn to employ them for critical purposes while at the same time handling them critically, that is, refraining from any positive validity claims based on their use.

In view of these shared characteristics, I propose that from a methodological point of view, both the Upanishadic and the Kantian ideas are probably best understood as ideas that lend themselves to merely critical employment. They do not warrant any kinds of generalizing claims about the world. Borrowing an apt phrase of Ryle (1949, pp. 117 and 122; 2009, pp. 105 and 110f), we might say that ideas of reason represent *no inference-tickets* (or licences) for claiming knowledge and rationality beyond the limits of contextual assumptions. Rather, they challenge us to deal carefully with such assumptions. This is possible inasmuch as contextual assumptions, although unavoidable, are variable. We can try to change them so as to do justice to a situation; we can share and discuss them with others; and we can carefully qualify and limit the claims that depend on them.

General ideas of reason, meaning both Upanishadic and Kantian ideas, are in this respect similar to ideals: although human inquiry and practice will never

completely "realize" their intent, that is, understand it and make it real, we can at least try to *approximate* it and to do justice to it partly, in some well-reasoned ways. Their counter-factual nature then does not make ideas of reason useless, no more than ideals. Quite the contrary, it creates a healthy distance to "normal" knowledge and practice and in this way provides impetus for approximating their intent in ways that are critically reflected, systematic, and arguable. This is precisely the kind of use that we had in mind in a previous essay of this series (see Ulrich, 2014b), where we explored the "approximation" of general ideas by means of what we initially described as a "double movement of critical thought" and then came to understand as a "cycle of critical contextualization," that is, a process of systematic clarification of contextual assumptions by means of iterative decontextualization (or universalization) and (re-)contextualization (or specification) of the assumptions and implications of claims.

At the end of this examination of the notions of *brahman*, *atman*, and *jagat*, we can thus note that we have encountered similar intentions as well as similar limitations in Upanishadic and Kantian ideas. From a methodological rather than metaphysical or religious perspective, none of these ideas is adequately understood if we take them to guide us towards secure knowledge and rational practice. Neither certainty of knowledge nor a guarantee of rational practice is within their reach. They nevertheless retain an indispensable role for reason, in that they offer us a deeper understanding of the limitations of human knowledge, thought, and practice and thus can also guide us in dealing systematically with these limitations. There is a remarkable affinity between Upanishadic and Kantian ideas in this respect: they touch upon ultimate limitations and challenges of the human quest for understanding the world we live in and for improving our lives. Therein I locate their shared, lasting relevance for our epoch, and therein I also see the reason why they continue to fascinate so many people world-wide.

In the continuation of this exploration, I plan to illustrate the analysis made thus far by applying it to a major Upanishadic text, and subsequently to situate the understanding gained of the three core concepts of *brahman*, *atman* and *jagat* within our developing framework of critical pragmatism.

(To be continued)

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Notes

- 20) The proper use of reason entails a double challenge to reason. On the one hand, reason itself is the only instance to control its proper use; on the other hand, it has to become practical, that is, it must "work" (ensure proper results) in real-world practice. Compare on this double touchstone Kant's (1787) call, in the preface of the first *Critique*, for a *self-tribunal of reason* along with Ganeri's (2001) nicely complementary call, in the subtitle of his book on classical Indian philosophy, for the *proper work of reason*. I have deliberately chosen the phrase "proper use of reason" so as to remind us of both touchstones of reason: when it comes to ensuring a proper use of reason, "proper" means "self-critical" (reason's concern in its own integrity) as well as "effective" (reason as a critical instance of practice). Bringing these two concerns together is the essence of what I propose we understand by *reflective practice*. [\[BACK\]](#)
- 21) The word "jagat" or derivatives of it can be found today in several languages of India that belong to the Indo-European language family (e.g., Modern Standard [Hindi](#), [Bengali](#), and [Odia](#) or formerly Oriya) as well as in others, for example in [Tamil](#), which belongs to the Dravidian language family and knows the Sanskrit loan word "jagat" as well as its variant "[jakat](#)" for "world"). It is also found in other contemporary languages of South-East Asia, for example, in [Malay](#) and [Indonesian](#), which belong to the Austronesian language family, and in Indo-German languages spoken in and outside India such as [Nepali](#), the lingua franca of Nepal, and Modern Standard [Urdu](#), a variant of Hindi that is the lingua franca of Pakistan and North India and is rather similar to Hindi but is written in [Urdu script](#) rather than Devanagari. In these contemporary languages, "jagat" now basically means as much as "land," "world," or "universe." For example, as the [Hindi-English Online Dictionary](#) tells me, "Academia" (the academic world) is referred to in contemporary Hindi as "shiksha-jagat," meaning literally "the world of education"; the same phrase occurs in Odia. Further, as my appreciated colleague of Indian origin and co-editor of the *Journal of Research Practice*, D.P. Dash (2013d) informs me, there exist today in India a few news media such as *Jagat Kranti*, a Hindi newspaper with currently negligible online presence; *Samachar Jagat*, an electronic newspaper that comes mostly in Devanagari script; and *Jagat News*, a news aggregation website that currently is under reconstruction. In Jakarta, Indonesia, I find *Jagat Review*, an online service offering reviews of household electronics, games, movies, etc. (By the way, the name of the city of [Jakarta](#), too, is etymologically related to jagat.) The term also appears as part of the names of cinemas (e.g., Jagat Cinema in Old Dehli), gaming sites (e.g., Jagat Play), hotels (e.g., Jagat Palace), and so on. It is quite possible that the term "jagat" is used more widely today than in the epoch in which the Upanishads originated (approximately 800-500 BCE). For readers who would like to do their own research, a good scholarly source to begin with is the [Digital Libraries of South Asia](#) site (CLR, 2013). [\[BACK\]](#)
- 22) Many more examples can be found of contemporary English and German words that (with varying degrees of plausibility and available evidence) appear to be related to the three word families and which thus may also have some roots in *jagat*. Examples in English are the words to *act*, *active*, *actor*, *agent*, *agile*, *chase*, *haw*, *jacket*, *jag*, *jagged*, *jaguar*, *to jog*, *to joggle*; and *jug*; and in German, the words *achten* (= to esteem, respect), *üchten* (= to ostracize, banish), *beachten* (= to pay attention to, take into account), *beobachten* (= to observe), *agieren*, *agil*, *Acker* (=acre, field), *Agrar-*, *Agrikultur*, *Aktie* (= share), *aushecken* (= to hatch, think up), *behaglich* (= comfortable, cosy), *hager* (=haggard, lean, scraggy), *Heck* (=orig. gate in a *hag*, opening in a hedge, now back or rear door of a vehicle), *Jacke* (=jacket, from Middle English *jaket* and related to Old French *jaque*), *joggen* (= to jog), and many others. [\[BACK\]](#)
- 23) Interestingly, and conforming to this reading of jagat, the Swedish language knows the words *jag* for "I" and, derived from it, *jaget* for "selfhood" (ipseity), that is, all the

characteristics or conditions that make up a person's sense of identity and which may also result in a state of self-centeredness or selfishness. Compare, for example, the Swedish title of Erwin Goffman's (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, "Jaget och maskerna," which literally means as much as "self and masks," amounting to a title such as "The Self and its Masks" or (including the Swedish edition's subtitle) "Sense of Identity and Use of Masks in Presenting Oneself" (see Goffmann, 1974; thanks are due to D.P. Dash, 2014, for drawing my attention to the Swedish book title). [BACK]

- 24) Compare on these three basic virtues (or demands) of reason the corresponding *critically-heuristic ideas* (or quasi-transcendental ideas) in my work on CSH, by which I mean ideas that play an essential part in "securing at least as critical solution to the problem of practical reason" – the *systems idea*, the *moral idea*, and the *guarantor idea* (Ulrich, 1983; on the concept of a "critical solution," see pp. 20, 35-37, 176f, 198, 265f, 313, and on the concept of "critically-heuristic ideas," pp. 231-234, 239f, 257-264). [BACK]

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May-June, 2015



Jagat mithya: in search of the real world

Brahman satyam, jagat mithya.

„Brahman is the real reality, the world is deceptive.”

(Adi Shankara, 8th/9th century, cited in *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, Bowker, 1997, p. 164)

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