

Upaniṣads -3

The Ultimate Reality

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We have seen before that, in contrast to Western concept of philosophy, Indian philosophy as represented by the Upaniṣads keeps ethics out of its span¹. To Upaniṣadic thinkers, philosophy is metaphysics, if we ignore stray attempts to analyse the mind found here and there in this literature. The obvious reason for keeping out ethical concepts is that, whether they are conceived as part of religion or not, they are relational in character and belong to the world of relativity, while the concept of the Ultimate Reality is absolute in its character. Ethics is limited by space and time and is bound to change with them. It is tied with tradition and the interests of groups, particularly of human society. It can never attain the status of the absolute and hence, of Reality. Ethics is a mutual arrangement for a smooth conduct of human interests as conceived by different groups under the impact of their respective traditions. Does it mean that ethics has no place in Indian philosophical thought? It has, only as a means of the purification of the mind², – a precondition for the emergence of the experience of the Ultimate Reality. As such, it is to be pursued for no worldly gains. This explains why Yoga makes room for ethical tenets³ (termed *Yamas* and *Niyamas*) as complementary to meditation, – the ultimate in Yoga.

The concept of the Ultimate Reality has evolved out of an insatiable urge to identify generalities in specificities. This analytical process is beautifully illustrated in a dialogue in the Chāndogya Up.⁴ All products of the clay are, in the final analysis, only clay in their essence. They exist only inasmuch as the clay exists. They differ only in names and forms which, being conventional and operating only at the speech level, are not the reality. The clay alone is the reality. Similarly, gold is the reality in golden ornaments; iron is the reality in everything made of iron. When this process is applied to the constituents of the world, we reach *existence* as the ultimate generality⁴. The Ups. term it *sat* and conceive it to be the Ultimate Reality out of which the world, a mere conglomeration of names and forms, evolves and unto which it merges. This principle is characterised by consciousness (*cit*) and bliss (*ānanda*), and is variously named as *brahman* (the most common name), *ātman*, *paramātman*, and so on. The words *sat*, *cit* and *ānanda* have consequently become the key words in Ups. in defining the Ultimate Reality. From the absolute point of view, the individual soul is not different from it, although, at the level of the reality of the worldly life, it does not experience this nature except, temporarily, in deep sleep. The concept of liberation of the soul is contained in its permanent restoration to this real nature. This outline forms the essence of the teaching of the Ups.

This Reality is obviously impersonal. It assumes a personal character when viewed as the substrate of the emergence, sustenance and dissolution of the world, – a process which is conceived to be continuously operating on the world. According to this analysis, the world exists at a lower level of reality, that of earthen pots and golden ornaments in the illustrations cited above. It is this concept of levels of reality supported by common experience that has lent the Upaniṣadic thought a rational character. The dream has its own reality different from that of the waking state. The objects in a dream are real to us as long as we stay in the dreaming state; they turn unreal as soon as we are shifted to the waking state. This reasoning is extended to the conception of an absolute reality in which the worldly or practical or relative reality turns unreal. All that is characterised by relativity belongs to lower reality, as explained earlier in this note. This discussion leads us to conceive three levels of reality: the absolute (*pāramārthika*), the practical (*vyāvahārika*) and the apparent (*prātibhāsika*). They respectively relate to the state of liberation, the

waking state and the dreaming state.⁵ Instances of false knowledge (e.g. a rope is mistaken for a snake) pertain to the last category.

NOTES

- 1 Cf. *anyatra dharmād anyatrādharmād anyatrāsmāt kṛtākṛtāt / anyatra bhūtāc ca bhavyāc ca yat paśyasi tad vada* // (Kaṭha. II.14: Tell me what you see beyond do's and beyond don'ts, and beyond action and inaction, and beyond the past and the future.) In reply, the God of Death says: *na jāyate mriyate vā vipaścin nāyam kutaścin na babhūva kaścit / ajo nityaḥ śāśvato 'yam purāṇo na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre* // (Kaṭha. II.18: This Self consisting of pure consciousness is not born, nor is dead; he is neither the effect of anything else nor of itself. He is unborn, eternal, free from degeneration and growth. He is not destroyed even when the body is destroyed.) Further: *aśarīraṁ śarīreṅv anavastheṅv avasthitam/ mahāntaṁ vibhum ātmānaṁ matvā dhīro na śocati* // (Kaṭha. II.22: The wise passes beyond grief on realizing the nature of the Self as bodiless despite staying in perishable bodies, as great and as all-pervading.)
- 2 Cf. *nāvirato duścaritān nāśānto nāsamāhitaḥ / nāśānta-mānaso vā 'pi prajñānenainam āpnuyāt* // (Kaṭha. II.24: No one who has not desisted from evil deeds, is not peaceful, lacks concentration, is not stable-minded, can grasp this Self through verbal knowledge.)
- 3 *Yamas* (vows) are: non-injury, truthfulness, non-theft, celibacy and not holding property. *Niyamas* (observances) are: purity, contentment, penance, study and surrender to God. (Yoga-sūtra II.30, 32)
- 4 *yathā somyaikena mṛtpiṇḍena sarvaṁ mṛnmayam vijñātaṁ syād, vācārambhaṇam vikāro nāmadheyam, mṛttikety eva satyam* / (Chāndogya. VI.1.4: Just as, O dear, by knowing a single clod of clay, everything made of clay would be known; for the effect exists only at the verbal level, the clay alone is the reality.) Further: *sad eva somyedam agra āsīd ekam evādvitīyam* / (Ibid. VI.2.1: In the beginning, existence alone existed, – one, only, and without a second.)
- 5 The Māṇḍūkya Up. identifies four states of consciousness broadly corresponding to four levels of reality: waking, dreaming, deep sleep and liberation. It is by bracketing the last two states that the three levels of reality are recognised above, the difference between the two being rooted in their temporary and permanent nature respectively, although the experience of the supreme bliss in the two does not essentially differ.