



Transcendental Self in Upanishad and Greek Philosophy

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Abstract— *The concept of the self has posed a persistent challenge throughout the history of philosophy. Both modern and Postmodern theories of self have either outright rejected it or struggled to grasp its essence. In this paper, I endeavour to revisit the Greek and Upanishadic traditions to gain insight into the true nature of the self. Despite their differences, these two traditions share a common thread: they define the self in relation to its transcendental realm. The central hypothesis of this paper is to argue that in order to truly understand the nature of the self, it is imperative to consider it in its holistic entirety, which necessarily involves acknowledging the transcendental sphere of the self.*

Keywords— *Self, Transcendentalism, Upanishad, Greeks*



I. INTRODUCTION

With the rise of Postmodern theories, every established definition and unified narrative came under vehement criticism and rejection. Lyotard famously encapsulated Postmodernism as “Incredulity towards Meta-Narratives” (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv). One of the most significant narratives once considered the ultimate deducing point for all meaning was The Self. However, Postmodern theories have dismissed it because “the self, which began the century looking unified—the master of its own house—ended it looking fragmented—a byproduct of social and psychological conditions” (Martin & Barresi, 2006, p.229). This paper aims to explore how the contemporary approach towards the self has resulted in fragmentation among human beings and brought about a sense of meaninglessness in their lives. It will particularly focus on elucidating the concept of the transcendental self, drawing upon insights from the Upanishads and Ancient Greek Philosophy. Furthermore, the paper will argue why the recognition of the transcendental self is crucial for personal growth and the cultivation of an ethical life.

Slavoj Zizek posits that within the philosophical tradition, there are two primary approaches: *The Transcendental* and *The Ontological* (2014, p.04). The Transcendental approach delves into the limitations of the human self and its perception of reality. It grapples with

questions such as: What is the relationship between the human mind and universal consciousness? On the other hand, the Ontological approach focuses on investigating the nature of reality itself, independent of human beings. Scientific revolution and technological advancements follow the ontic approach while explaining the self or the world.

II. THE TRANSCENDENTAL SELF

Transcendentalism is not merely a school or system within the philosophical tradition; it is an approach aimed at making sense of this world for human self. Within human existence, there are two realities: the physical and the mental. While physical realities operate under discernible laws governed by causality, the mental world presents a challenge, as no such laws are readily apparent.

In attempting to understand the complexities of the mental world, two options emerge: either reject it altogether or devise new laws distinct from physical laws. While the former has been a common response, contemporary times have largely dismissed the reduction of the mental world to physical laws. Instead, there is a growing acknowledgment of the need to invent a new system of laws. A fascinating revelation occurs when exploring Upanishadic or Greek philosophy, where perpetual endeavours to discover laws governing the mental world are evident. Eastern philosophy

and the Greeks recognized that a human being is a holistic entity, understanding that true harmony lies in reconciling these two distinct aspects of the human self. Raju points out this as, “Apart from ancient and classical systems, Indian or Western, a true and workable philosophy of life must give equal recognition to the two dimensions of man’s being, the inward and the outward” (1954, p.213).

Flournoy argues that the quest to find a singular deduction point does not inherently classify a system as transcendental philosophy. According to him, transcendental philosophy is not a distinct school within the philosophical tradition; rather, it represents the pursuit of perfection within a specific school of thought. He opines that “Every system carried to its high, or *greatest* perfection becomes transcendental” (Flournoy, 1846, p. 233). For example, If Marxism endeavours to address and provide solutions to all human problems, it can be considered a transcendental school of thought. Through this ambitious endeavour, Marxism positions itself above other ideologies, placing itself as the ultimate deductive point from which all meaning can be gathered.

Varma (1960) observes that Indian philosophy delves into the transcendental realm of being, where the self transcends rational faculties of the mind. The self, always the subject of higher experience, finds its understanding obscured by the empirical world. The primary pursuit in Indian philosophy lies in freeing the self from its empirical constraints to realize its inner potential. Similarly, Greek philosophy also explores the transcendental realm of being, seeking to synthesize appearances into a singular reality. However, the approach differs significantly. because in the Greek philosophy, “they [Greek Philosophers] cultivated the refinements of sense and intellect. They liked to create a system of metaphysics based on pure concepts, and were not concerned primarily or especially with the questions of liberation and emancipation” (Varma, 1960, p.136).

Raju argues that the main distinction between Indian and Western Philosophy lies in the problem of *disentanglement* (1954, p.209). While the Greeks discussed transcendental elements to comprehend the world, their approach resembled that of a physicist or scientist analysing the perceived world to uncover fundamental reality. In contrast, Indian Philosophy is synthetic in nature, integrating perceived reality under the unified principle of Brahma. While the Greeks sought to disentangle the empirical from the transcendental, Indian philosophical tradition found its controller in Brahma, positioning it at the very essence of existence, embodying a unified principle that transcends the apparent duality of the world.

The Upanishads do not focus solely on individual aspects of a person; rather, they delve into ultimate

questions of being, such as death and suffering. In exploring these questions, Ancient Indian thought amalgamates metaphysical and ethical concerns of human beings. Varma highlights this characteristic of Indian Philosophy, elevating it beyond the confines of space and time specification. He notes that, “Ancient Indian thought is universalistic in orientation” (1960, p.136).

In Swami Rama’s Commentary on the Mandukya Upanishad, the Self is never viewed as an isolated entity but is intricately connected to both the empirical and transcendental worlds. The self, or Atman, is described in four stages—*Vaisvanara*, *Tajjasa*, *Prajna*, and *Turiya* (Waking, Dreaming, Deep Sleep, and Para Brahma)—which encompass its complete experience (Rama, 1988, p.36). These three states can be likened to four levels, where each successive stage incorporates and builds upon the previous one. Therefore, Turiya represents the ultimate state of the self, encapsulating all aspects of being.

The first three stages depict the evolution of the self, which traverses through the illusory and empirical worlds before reaching the transcendental realm of being. In the Katha Upanishad, Nachiketa queries the nature of the self because knowledge of the entire world does not lead to understanding the self. He learns that comprehending the self requires understanding its relation to Brahma.

The Upanishadic approach to the mind-body problem differs from Cartesian method. Descartes dissects a being into mind and body without positing any unifying phenomenon. Cartesian God is not a transcendental entity but merely a functional proof for the existence of the outer world. In contrast, the Upanishads discuss the harmony between mind and body, which is the essence of Brahma or the ultimate reality. Katha Upanishad professes that “Know the Atman (Self) as the lord of the chariot, and the body as the chariot. Know also the intellect to be the driver and mind the reins” (Paramananda, 1919, p.65).

Plato also dissects the soul into three parts—the *logistikon* (reason), the *thymoeides* (spirit, emotion), and the *epithymetikon* (appetite, desire)—in the *Republic*. However, this demarcation differs from the Upanishadic fourfold division of the soul because Plato defines the soul while standing outside the body, adopting a scientific point of view that rejects the possibility of any inner experience as proposed by the Upanishads. Hence, Stocks points out that this distinction is often utilized in psychological studies to elucidate the harmony between reason, emotion, and desire (1915, p.216). This distinction even resonates in Kierkegaardian three spheres of existence: Aesthetic, Ethical, and Religious. However, as Roberts points out, Plato projects the soul as a fundamental substance that integrates the diverse functions of mind and body. For Plato,

Soul has primarily two functions; “the subject of knowledge or of cognitive activity in general and as the principle of movement or of life” (Roberts, 1905, p.372).

The Upanishads establish a hierarchy in the functioning of beings where everything complements each other rather than dominating one another. In the Katha Upanishad, a journey is traced where the primary means to interact with outer reality is the senses, yet these senses are guided by the mind, which in itself is merely an instrument. This instrument is directed by the intellect, and without the control of intellect, it is bound to fail. Intellect is a quality that categorizes experiences so that external reality makes sense to the human psyche. Although intellect has its limitations, these can be overcome when it realizes the omniscient Atman behind it, which is a part of the ultimate reality. Therefore, the Upanishad says that “A wise man should control speech by mind, mind by intellect, intellect by the great Atman, and that by the Peaceful One” (Paramananda, 1919, p.69).

III. THE ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF TRANSCENDENTAL SELF

As mentioned earlier, Indian Philosophy does not separate the metaphysical and ethical aspects of existence; instead, they intertwine to form a holistic view of being. The metaphysical hierarchy in Indian Philosophy leads to the inherent goodness of being. With Atman positioned at the highest pedestal, governing all aspects of existence, actions naturally tend towards ethical conduct. Evil behavior is not seen as an ontological reality but rather as a *disharmony* within the functioning of being. In Indian philosophy, leading an ethical life is considered a prerequisite for achieving the ultimate goal because, “He who has not turned away from evil conduct, whose senses are uncontrolled, who is not tranquil, whose mind is not at rest, he can never attain this Atman even by knowledge (Paramananda, 1919, p.62).

Greek Philosophy discusses the ethical life in two phases: Pre-Socratic and Post-Socratic. Pre-Socratic philosophers did not prioritize ethics as their fundamental concern; instead, they focused more on the natural world and its problems. Their use of reason was directed towards finding their place in the universe, often marginalizing or discarding the quest for an ethical life. In Pre-Socratic literature, discussions of moral life were often intertwined with grand narratives of death and life. This might be because Pre-Socratic thinkers presupposed that if there exists a transcendental entity or fundamental substance, it would inevitably imply an ethical concern for life. Lewis notes this, “The problem of moral freedom was never an acute one for the Greeks. This was because they thought of

the moral life in terms of a goodness which men are by nature disposed to pursue” (1947, p.17).

It was Socrates who, for the very first time, understood that metaphysical objectivity requires objectivity in the epistemic and ethical spheres of life. His proclamation, *Virtue is Knowledge*, was an attempt to bridge the empirical world with the transcendental realm. Following Socrates, Plato’s Concept of Justice and Aristotle’s Notion of Eudaimonia reaffirm that the virtuous life is essential to realize the ultimate truths of life. One common thread among Pre-Socratic and Post-Socratic philosophers is their deep realization of the importance of rationality in the human psyche. Thus, even as the Greeks discussed ethics, they analyzed it with a scientific approach rather than through an emotional lens. Smith observes this as, “Virtue [for Greeks] is a form of rationality, since it is only by reason that we can locate the proper mean” (2001, p.18).

The Upanishads and Greeks were concerned about moral values, yet without a transcendental entity, morality becomes a subjective expression dominated by feelings and emotions. Plato criticized the Sophists for defining knowledge from a subjective standpoint, emphasizing that such knowledge fluctuates with space and time. Similarly, the rejection of grand narratives in the 20th century inevitably leads to the rejection of ethics. The fragmentation of the self results from the rejection of the transcendental self, which unites every aspect of being. The fragmented self looks outward and perceives its parts, whereas the Upanishads and Greeks looked inward and observed wholeness. In Isha Upanishad, it is stated that, “He who perceives all beings as the Self, for him how can there be delusion or grief, when he sees this oneness (everywhere)” (Paramananda, 1919, p.29).

IV. CONCLUSION

Transcendentalism does not presuppose a particular entity dwelling in another world; rather, it is an approach to elevating oneself to gain a more comprehensive view of things. The Transcendental self establishes a relationship with the unknown, which may exist within oneself or in the external world. Such a relationship with the unknown is beneficial in two ways: first, it helps the self realize its inner potentialities by introducing it to new possibilities; second, it aids in integrating the fragmented parts of the self, resulting in a more unified mental disposition.

Yoga Darshana accepts God as the 26 elements but only for functional purposes. In Yoga Philosophy, God does not hold any metaphysical status rather it serves as an instrument to attain samadhi. The Upanishads and Greeks

explained the nature of the Self by considering its transcendental realm, but modern philosophy rejects these spheres of self, leading to the relativism of post-modernity. The meaninglessness and chaos of Postmodern philosophy can only be overcome by projecting a comprehensive picture of the self that involves each and every sphere of its being.

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