

**Can ambiguities in the Upanishadic Notions of Self be understood
from a unified position?**

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15 December 2024

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The question prompts three foci; why various Upanishadic explanations of self exist, what their commonalities and dissonances are, and how a convergent exegesis can be established. Only the Principal Upanishads¹ are considered for the first element; further narrowed by the selection of specific segments of text that demonstrate contrasting ontological or metaphysical emphasis, varied rhetorical style in verse or prose, and a distinguishable chronology. The Brhandarankya Upanishad, as one of the earliest and the vastest, is given greatest consideration, establishing a comparative foundation.

Immediate weaknesses of any argument for a unified interpretative platform are compounded by the Upanishads having provided the well-spring for at least six diverse Hindu Philosophical Schools² and other religions e.g., Buddhism and Jainism, each pulling forth some elements to the exclusion of others whilst declaring their own as the only “true” interpretation³. Looking

¹ 13 Upanishads are widely accepted as “Main” “Major” or “Principal” (Olivelle, A New Translation, OUP, 1996), however some refer to the 10 that were the subject of Sankara’s commentaries (Brahmasutrabhasya c 800 CE). Cf Bartley 12 (An Introduction to Indian Philosophy, Continuum, 2010). The number of Upanishads total is listed in canon form as 108 in the Muktika Upanishad (1883 CE) but estimated as hundreds more (IEP 2023)

² Advaita, Shuddhadvaita (non-dual, monistic), Vishishtadvaita, Shuddhadvaita, Dvaitadvaita (qualified non-dual), Dvaita (montheistic pluralism)

³ Black, ‘Senses of Self and Not-Self in the Upanisads and Nikayas’, Kuznetsova, Ganeri, Ram Prasa (ed.s) Hindu and Buddhist Ideas, Ashgate (2012)

instead for unity within the Upanishads “as they are”, prior to any further intrinsic or extrinsic doctrinal evolution, is not a feat entered in order to disprove or even challenge the fundamentals of later developments. Rather it is to explore foundational unity in epistemology and language; which, inter alia, includes support from Aristotle, James, Wittgenstein, and Schopenhauer. I intend to prove that the Upanishads are both an a priori and an a posteriori repository of a dynamic philosophy in action, and this is the position of unity that enables their differing notions of self to be understood. The history and position of the Upanishads in the rich Vedic culture of their provenance underlies all three focal sections, thus forms both beginning and the substructure to the question’s answer.

The Vedas, of which the Upanishads form the “the end of” or *Vedanta*, are traced to oral beginnings around 1500 BCE in the northwest Indian Subcontinent. They are written in Sanskrit, a member of the Proto-Indo-European ethnolinguistic family that includes Greek, Latin, Slavic, and Proto-Iranian languages, supporting attribution to the Aryans who began mass migration through the Hindu Kush up to 500 years earlier⁴. The Vedas stand as the foundation, the *Shruti* or “what is (divinely) heard” component, of a complete and comprehensive Indian knowledge and education system, where all other elements are subservient to their authority⁵. They are in four compendiums, the Rgveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, Atharvaveda, and each of these has four elements: Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads⁶. The Upanishads stand at both the conclusion of each Veda and as an independent collection.

⁴ Some scholars believe that the influence of the indigenous people, already highly civilised at the time, has been minimised on this basis. For further reading see michelwitzel.org (Wales Professor of Sanskrit, Harvard 1986 -)

⁵ See Appendix 1: The Vedic Structure.

⁶ Further explanation of these is also given in Appendix 1.

There are philological concerns in any Upanishadic commentary. Here, I have primarily employed the translation by Olivelle (1996)⁷, yet it would be wrong to suggest this as perfectly authoritative, correct to state that none could be. The reasons are twofold, one macro, relating to the original recording of oral tradition that relied on “*guru sishya parampara*” (teacher and student), and one micro, due to use of specific terminology. Dealing with the first is outside the scope of this essay, except to note that four of the six *Vedangas*⁸, interpretive guides that are categorised as part of secondary Smriti or “*what is remembered*” canonical literature, are dedicated to issues of etymology, phonetics, grammar and linguistic patterns, indicating both the importance of correct interpretation and anticipated difficulties of written transmission in Sanskrit alone. As Molendijk writes with reference to Muller’s Cautions, “Translations are helpful, but they can still be easily misunderstood. What to make, for instance, of the ‘perplexing’ beginning of the *Chandogya Upanishad*: ‘Let a man worship the syllable Om’? To understand this expression, one has to know that meditation on this syllable consisted of its continuous repetition ‘with view...of concentrating...on some higher object of thought’”⁹ It could be argued that Molendijk herself has misunderstood, as vibrational sounds are central to Vedic teachings.¹⁰

The second, an extension of the first, relates to the use of terms for central concepts of the Upanishads, those such as “Self” “Consciousness” “Atman” “Brahman”. They are used separately to describe distinct concepts, interchangeably to describe each other, paradoxically for variants of a singular definition and at times surrendered for an entirely different word, with and without obvious conceptual departure. As Olivelle observes, “the term most frequently used [for] a living breathing body is atman, a term liable to misunderstanding because it can

⁷ Upanisads, A New Translation, OUP (1996) also, Easwaran, The Upanishads, Blue Mountain 2nd ed. (2007), Shearer, Russell, The Upanishads, Wildwood (1978), Hume, The Principal Upanishads, 2nd ed. OUP (1931)

⁸ Again Appendix 1.

⁹ Molendijk, Arie L., 'Concepts and Ideas', *Friedrich Max Müller and the Sacred Books of the East*

¹⁰ Wilke, Moebus, *An Aesthetic Cultural History of Sanskrit Hinduism*, Walter de Gruyter (2011)

also mean the spiritual self or innermost core”¹¹. Several translators have resorted to capitalisation e.g. *atman* and *Atman* in Hume’s case or *self* and *Self* in Eswaran’s¹², as a practical decision to aid understanding of whether the embodied human being with all its physiology and psychology (miniscule), or the true essence of self which is universal (majuscule), is being referred to, but there is no such distinction in the texts themselves.

The limitations of our own language plus these issues are further bewildered by the Upanishads’ nature of origin. The Upanishads arose from a series of forest-based schools dedicated to *Brahmavidya*, “the science of the Supreme”. Not only were the schools vying for prominence over each other, with “different teachers offering distinct teachings that are often in contradistinction to each other”¹³, but the period of Principal Upanishadic development, approximately 700 BCE to 100 BCE, has a distinct split between before and after the burgeoning Buddhist and Jain heterodoxies. In the latter Upanishads, the *Isha* which is traditionally placed first, *Svetasvatara*, *Mundaka* and *Katha*, there is a tendency towards poetic, theistically devotional language that is not seen in earlier texts, as if in rebuttal to these non-dualist movements. Finding a pragmatic framework that behaves sympathetically to these variances, in a way that reflects their intention and culture, as Wittgenstein would urge¹⁴, is paramount to avoid reducing Upanishadic philosophy to semantics.

Students of the Vedas would spend years in the company of their gurus¹⁵ learning *how* to learn about the self. It becomes obvious why much of Upanishadic teaching squirms under the spotlight of modern academic scrutiny; whereas we see dialogue throughout the Upanishads between teacher and student(s) reminiscent of the ancient Greeks, it does not solely stand as a

¹¹ Ibid., n7 Olivelle p.xiix

¹² Ibid., n7

¹³ Black, *Upanisads*, Chapter 12, Bilmeria, Rayner (ed.s) *History of Indian Philosophy*, Routledge (2018)

¹⁴ Stern, David G., *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*, OUP (1995)

¹⁵ CU VI 1-16 refers to a standard period of 12 years

philosophy of intellectual reasoning, nor of religion but also as one of *the process of preparing for and engaging in direct experience*.

The Brhadarankya is the most extensive Upanishad and believed, alongside the Chandogya, to be one of the earliest. In simplest terms, it starts with nothingness, called Death, who creates water from an idea, next desiring itself an embodied atman, which is also itself and then desiring itself another atman, again also itself, which through addition both becomes and comes into the world, all as itself, from this position of desire¹⁶. The contemporaneous Chandogya then proceeds to deny this absolutely, first claiming the origins of the world are space itself¹⁷, then offering what we might call a low-level big bang or the cosmic egg theory¹⁸ and later the principle of one begetting the many, “this world was simply existent - one only, without a second”¹⁹. The Aiteraya²⁰ begins the world similarly, with an existent one whose thought is the start of creation, whereas the Shvetashtara talks of time, nature, intelligence and energy as not the first cause, but effects of it, moreover the effects of a “Lord of Love”, also Brahman. Despite these various speculative cosmologies all the Upanishads agree that some transcendent primal or Supreme called Brahman, (whether no-thing or some-thing) plus desire in the sense of manifested idea are the origin which is both everything and beyond everything and is to become the central tenet of transmigration and soteriological want. The Brhadaranyka continues;

“In the beginning this world was just a single body (atman) shaped like a man. He looked around and saw nothing but himself. The first thing he said was ‘Here I am!’ and from that,

¹⁶ Biderman, S., & ROTEM, O. (2008). My-Self: DESCARTES AND EARLY UPANISHADS ON THE SELF. In *Crossing Horizons: World, Self, and Language in Indian and Western Thought* (pp. 119–174). Columbia University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/bide14024.7>

¹⁷ CU I 8-9

¹⁸ CU 3.19

¹⁹ CU 6.4.2

²⁰ AU 1.1

the 'I' came into being. Therefore, even today when you call someone, he first says, 'It's I' and then states whatever other name he may have... when someone knows this he burns up anyone who may try to get ahead of him"²¹

"In the beginning this world was only Brahman, and it knew only itself (atman), thinking, 'I am Brahman' As a result it became the whole...likewise whoever realised this became the Whole" ²²

Here, in just a few short sections of the first chapter of the Brihadarankya Upanishad, the notion of *I* is set, ontologically as an equal amongst all other *Is*, metaphysically as the element of self that is the same as the source of itself, and epistemologically as the understanding and realisation of the true nature of self is set as its aim.

As Raj (2023) asserts, "According to *Upanishad* view, only when we understand and realize the true nature of self, we can understand the concept of reality"²³. Raj's statement is well posited, and provides a helpful distinction between metaphysical speculation and the acquisition of knowledge or experience. Throughout the Upanishads these two branches are evident: a keen intellectual movement to resolve religious and cultural questions based in the ritual and mythology of the existing Vedas, and this desire to know the self by means of introspection and contemplation, much in line with the thought experiments of Avicenna²⁴. One might argue that there is no unity in the former, a theory borne out by the ontological divergences of the future. The second element however is open to edification - the Upanishads are not suggesting that one sits and contemplates the nature of God (Brahman), they are instead

²¹ BU 1.4.4

²² BU 1.4.10

²³ Raj, Pufa,. Self and Reality: An Upanishadic View, Journal of Human Values, Volume 29, Issue 3, September 2023

²⁴ Kaukua, 'Avicenna and the Phenomenon of Self-Awareness. The Experiential Basis of the Flying Man.' Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy. Avicenna and Beyond. CUP (2015)

saying “know thyself”, and in doing so you will, *as an accident*, know God too. The Upanishads record these results.

From the excerpt, we also see an exposition of semantic vexations in the use of atman as a body, and atman as Brahman, and their interchangeability. Which do they mean? What is the distinction? Is there a distinction? Or, returning to Wittgenstein, how does it matter?

*“Like two golden birds perched on the self-same tree,
Intimate friends the ego and the self
As long as we think we are the ego,
We feel attached and fall into sorrow
But realise you are the Self, the Lord
Of Life²⁵”*

*“Two birds companions and friends,
nestle on the same tree.
One of them eats a tasty fig;
the other, not eating, looks on
Stuck on the very same tree,
One person grieves, deluded
But when he sees the other,
the contented Lord – and his majesty -
his grief disappears²⁶”*

²⁵ Ibid., n7, Easwaran, p192

²⁶ Ibid., n7 Olivelle p274

This passage is the Mundaka 3.1.1. One is translated as the essence of message, as a teacher might explain meaning to a student, and one is translated as close to the original Sanskrit as possible. If one accepts that it is logically tied by its own thinking to a false self, and its real self remains hidden until released from those ties, one will not conclude anything other than that this same tree is the self, with two modes of awareness. Yet this verse has been frequently misinterpreted²⁷ as if there are two selves, just as elsewhere in the Aitareya e.g. as “other self”, missing the undoubted Jungian approach to the ego and soul or collective consciousness²⁸ that could be easily as even if not the same, be a helpful aid to understanding.

Returning to the Brhadarankya, a recurring dialogue of what self “is not” follows, the first *neti*, *neti*, or “not this, not that” of conversations held by the sage Yajnavalkya. In this with his wife Maitreyi, he takes a metaphorical knife to all attachments to anything other than the love for one’s self (atman). This is most definitely not in a narcissistic manner, but moreover an awe and respect for the self that is inherent in all things, the love for *one’s self that is the one self*²⁹. This is most easily understood if related to the well-known Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain ethical doctrine of *Ahimsa*, “harm to one is harm to all”³⁰, as a version of love to one is love to all. The self is not attachment, it is connection. The dialogue ends with a question that, reflecting on its age is as astonishing as it is insightful, expressing a recognisable foundation for ancient or modern philosophy, psychology, and physics alike, and cementing the Upanishad’s status for consideration by these disciplines:

“Look - by what means can one perceive the perceiver?”,

²⁷Hirst, 'Ātman and Brahman in the Principal Upaniṣads.' Cohen (ed.) The Upanisads. A Complete Guide. Routledge (2018)

²⁸ Jung, Memories, Dreams and Reflection, Fontana (1995)

²⁹ BU 2.4

³⁰ Sundararajan and Mukerji, Hindu spirituality: Postclassical and modern, Crossroad NY (1997)

The Ockham's razor-like response to this, as so with all the Upanishads is: "by doing it". The how to do it, and the results of the experience of doing it, are its aim.

The Brhadaranyaka's first two chapters are known as the Madhukanda, or "honey section", a nomenclature which will at once become obvious;

*"...earth is the honey of all beings, and all beings are the honey of this earth. The radiant and immortal person in the earth and, in the case of the body (atman), the radiant and immortal person residing in the physical body – they are both one's self (atman). It is the immortal; it is Brahman; it is the Whole"*³¹.

Here we have a further clarification of atman as the element of all and physical residence of itself, a clarification this section continues to qualify with "*they are both one's self*" by adding a long list of the "both"s: reproduction (as water), speech (fire), breath (wind), sight (sun), hearing (these combined), mind (moon), radiance (lightning), sound and tone (thunder), space within the heart (space), devotion to Law (Dharma) and Truth, human existence, person, connection to all beings ³².

We frequently see Yajnavalka rely on repetitive rhetoric to make his point³³. Another meeting, facilitated by King Janaka who wants "What is Brahman?" answered, introduces what Hirst describes as the "famous Inner Controller passage"³⁴. Yajnavalkya again issues the distinctions of the atman self that is both what is and what is beyond: "the self of yours who is present within but is different from x, whom x does not know, whose body is x and who controls x from within - he is the inner controller, the immortal" whereby x is variously, the elements, the cosmos, breath, sight, speech, hearing, beings, mind. Yajnavalkya consistently reinforces the atman that is Brahman that is self as both immanent and transcendent. He is at pains to explain

³¹ BU2.5.1

³² BU 2.5

³³ BU 3.2.2-9

³⁴ Ibid., n26

that due to the illusion of maya, most people attach to outer extensions and faculties, and thus fail to notice the inner quietly at work within them all. One might stretch to parallels Leibniz's Monadology, each monad unable to recognise something it came from but able to recognise that which comes from it, yet existing in a "best possible" divine harmony. But then an imaginary Kantian torture chamber might look much like this. First, we have the self/atman/Brahman that cannot be known as the thing-in-itself, then the speculation that one might know this thing, that which in the normal world it cannot know, not purely by knowledge of it but by revelatory glimpse experience. This is the fundamental message of the middle of the Brhandaranyaka. Yajnavalkya is the "expert witness" of these temporal glimpses of atemporal atman that is Brahman. Here he looks first to demonstrate his philosophy using dreamless sleep, a description also used in the Chandogya and Taittreya, as the "third state", then he experientially he compares this unitive state with sexual union, as being aware but absorbed and totally free from desire, not because desire has vanished but because in unity all desires are fulfilled, "where the self is the only desire"³⁵.

The Upanishads, amidst much speculation, also provide a series of thought experiments, and their results are charted in the pages. There is nothing outside the realms of Aristotle's perceptual knowing³⁶, where both senses and an intuition are involved in gaining knowledge, what I would term "soft" empiricism. Viewed from this perspective the differences in what is being said fade against the commonality of experience, and the noetic experience is common to every Upanishad.

This theme of fulfilled desire is essential to the understanding of reincarnation, and the aim of freedom from it. Unless desire is fulfilled at the time of death, only rebirth awaits. If however, self-realisation, the fulfilment of desire has happened one is absorbed back into Brahman.

³⁵ BU 4.3

³⁶ Gasser-Wingate, Marc, 'Perception, Knowledge, and Understanding in Aristotle's Epistemology', *Aristotle's Empiricism* (New York, 2021; online edn, Oxford Academic, 22 July 2021

Yajnavalka relies on the use of the word “consciousness”, as this place of connection, but it is *chit*, pure consciousness, whilst at the same time it is clearly out side of mind, time and space. When Boethius said of eternity, “the complete possession all at once of illimitable life³⁷, his description describes this union of the Brhadarankya well.

This dictum of Aham Brahmasmi, or “I am Brahman”, forms one of the six *Mahavakyas* or Great Sayings. Tvat Tsam Asi, “That Thou Art” is the more positive approach we find in the Chandogya, another repetitive prose to clarify that once in connection as true atman the experience goes everywhere. This move from “not” to positivity throughout the remaining Upanishads, and the prose is reduced to be supplanted with poetic descriptions of love, joy and bliss, and are highly experiential. Each builds on the exhaustive foundations of the Brhadarankya, and whilst the speculative variations remain, the experiential ones do not. Schopenhauer, one of the earliest Western proponents of the Upanishads wrote, “a transformation in which one becomes so absorbed in perceptual experience that one lose’s one’s individuality”³⁸, this is the nature of self that is not concerned with outside interpretations of speculation. The closing paragraph of the Mandukya seems fitting:

“The fourth, on the other hand is without constituent phenomes, beyond the reach of ordinary transaction, the cessation of the visible world, auspicious and unique. Accordingly, the very self is OM. Anyone who knows this, enters the self by himself³⁹”

For my conclusion I am switching to the first person. I believe that I have adequately, as opposed to comprehensively, demonstrated why and how variances appear and that a combination of Aristotelian pragmatism coupled with a compassionate, personalised approach

³⁷ Boethius, De Trinitate

³⁸ Schopenhauer, The World As Will and Idea, Kegan Paul, Trench, Truebener & Co, 1909 Kindle Ed

³⁹ Ibid., n7 Olivelle

to the gnostic qualities inherent in the texts provide a simple platform for understanding. Concentrating on the Brhadarankya as I did, provided me with many ideas for further exploration, particularly of the creation story right at the beginning. Death, the nothingness, is alluded to having various qualities or powers, one being desire in terms of a manifested idea which is identified in the essay in relation to atman's nature of desire and the principles of reincarnation. This however is a small part which did not address (nor was it intended to) the obvious question of whether nothingness indeed has qualities. But further is that Death is mind, (he makes up his mind to become body), which given the frequent Upanishadic references to "beyond mind", leads us once more to a distillation of miniscule mind and majuscule Mind. Death clearly has thoughts, if Death is the nothingness that paved the way for the Buddhist anatman or non-self, how can Death be a thinking being and if Death is a being how can it be nothingness? Does thought require a being? Death also speaks, and this first word establishes a Logos principle for the beginning of the world that most Westerners have strong familiarity with some 2000 years later in the Gospel of John. Furthermore, Death has reproductive desires, hunger, and a requirement for time. Death is also surprised by the fact that their thoughts create things, and they desire physical death not so that they die but so they are refreshed with a new body when the old one is no longer fit for purpose. If this Death is Brahman, which is Self, does this often consigned-as-mythical story, in only 7 short paragraphs of the outset of the earliest Upanishad, provide not only a robust Hermetic metaphysics but a thorough psychology of both cognitive and emotional human nature?

The language of many of the Upanishads, whilst discussed in semantic terms, has not been addressed comparatively. There are marked similarities of devotional terminology between it and that of Christian Mystics such as Augustine, Julian of Norwich, and Meister Eckhart or latterly Merton, with the continuous "thou" and "Lord of Love" posit in humility, and paragraphs of the Sufi Rumi's poem "On Great Wagon" would not be amiss anywhere in later

texts. This, for me, is a fascinating study, not least due to the Indo-European-Iranian heritage of all.

Leibniz also gained mention, and neither the scope of the question nor time and space allowed me the opportunity to explore this further. Whilst I am not suggesting *La Monadologie* can support an entire explanation of Upanishadic philosophy, I am suggesting that there is much “fruit to be had” from further comparative study of rational idealism and the Upanishads.

One of the outstanding features of researching the Upanishads is how few genuinely dedicated comparative scholarly articles exist outside of Schopenhauer. There is much to be seen that hastily tries to plump Upanishads to overall philosophies and much that essentially wades in to dispute them as a system of philosophy at all when they do not “fit” entirely, rather than allowing them to be exactly as they are. For their insight, their innovation, and their poetry for the soul, I remain an ardent fan of the Upanishads, exactly as they are.

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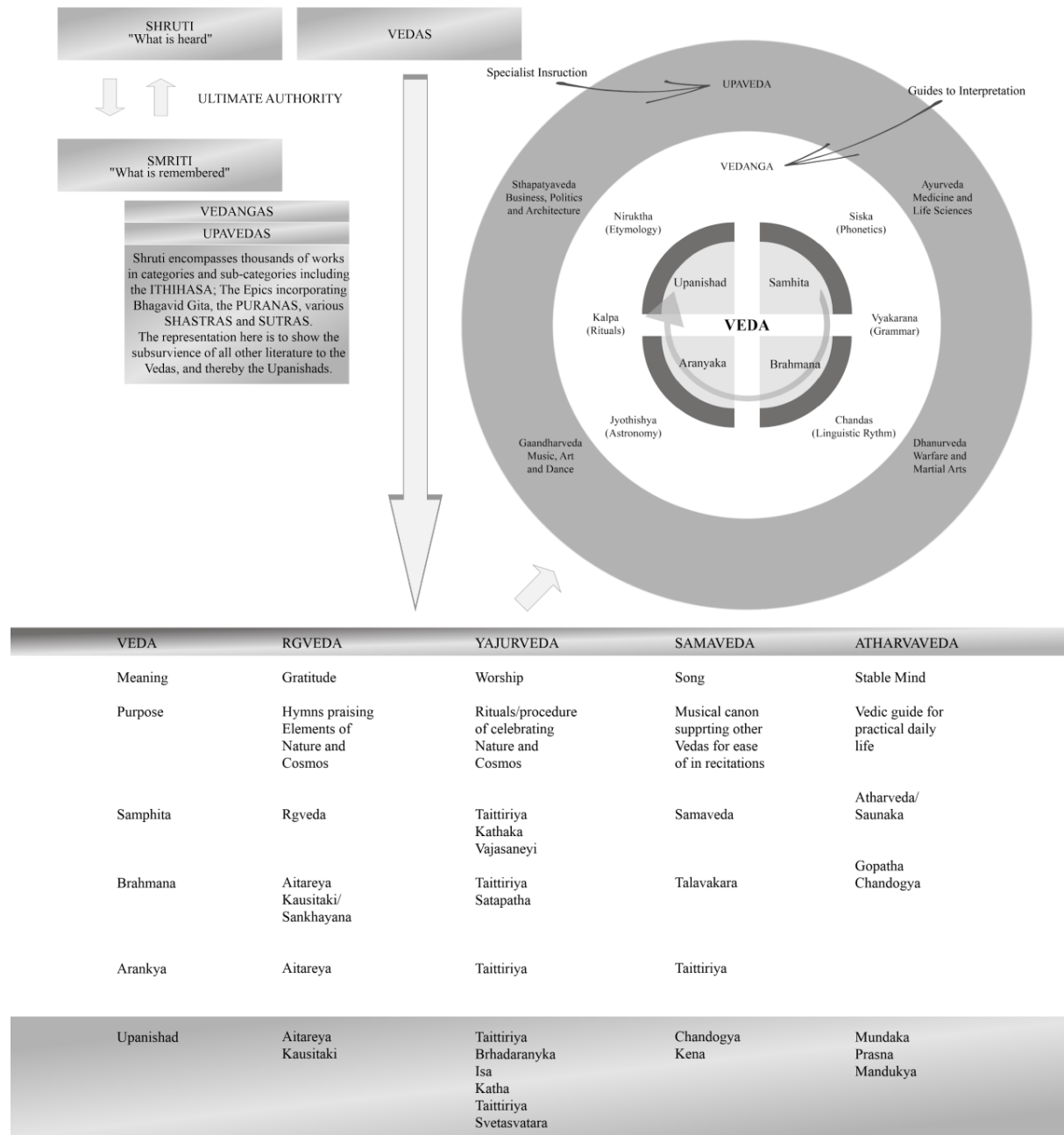
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Appendix 1: The Vedic Structure*



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