

11 *Ātman* and *brahman* in the principal Upaniṣads

Jacqueline Suthren Hirst

Introduction

The concepts of *ātman* and *brahman* as “true self” and “ultimate reality” are often presented as the most fundamental in the principal Upaniṣads. They are used to evidence an inward turn in the Vedic corpus from world-maintaining ritual to a renunciatory quest for knowledge which will liberate the seeker from this world of rebirth. That knowledge is said to comprise precisely the knowledge of the identity of *ātman* and *brahman*.¹

While this is a useful starting point, it contains a number of simplifications. These tidy up the complex processes whereby different seers sought to make sense of their Vedic world and so mask the considerable diversity of social contexts and viewpoints within these texts.

Basic meanings

The terms themselves have multiple senses. “*ātman*” is primarily a reflexive pronoun meaning “oneself” (“myself,” “yourself” etc), so it is important not to over-read it. However, in explorations of what it is that gives a person life, it does emerge, along with other competitors such as “breath” (*prāṇa*) and “person” (*puruṣa*), as a leading contender, linked with the exercise of consciousness.² At an individual level, it also becomes key in notions of personal identity in this life and continuity in rebirth (see Chapter 12). More basically, it may signify “body,” the physical aspect of a person (see Olivelle, 1996: 291). Through this, and its association with the notion of the Cosmic Person (*puruṣa*) whose sacrificial dismemberment establishes an ordered cosmos (RV 10.90), “*ātman*” can carry a sense of “the whole.” Finally, analogous to breath in the individual, “*ātman*” may indicate the Self within the cosmic totality.

“*brahman*,” whose etymology the eighth century commentator, Śaṅkara, gives as from the root, *bṛh-*, “to be great” or “to exceed,”³ is used, early, to designate the power of the Vedic ritual, the sacred chant, or its priestly custodians (Roebuck, 2003: xxviii). As the former, it has cosmic force, the power of the whole universe. Through this, it too comes to have the sense of “totality,” a kind

of universal set, whose parts may be variously understood. While “*ātman*” may refer to both the individual self and to the self of the cosmos in the principal Upaniṣads, “*brahman*” often retains a cosmological sense. However it is used, though, the term does not depart from its basic sense of that which is identified as the highest power or mystery by the particular speaker.

It requires a close reading of different texts to discover how, when, whether, and why these terms are used interchangeably, or whether they express a relationship of identity, unity, or difference between the two. The variability of usage, and the fact that there are no capital letters in Indian scripts, also challenges translators on how to transliterate the Sanskrit terms in the roman alphabet: *Brahman*,⁴ Brahman, *brahman*; and on how to translate “*ātman*”: oneself, body, self, Self. On transliteration, a decision needs to be made for consistency; on translation, the context and the translator’s interpretation will be key. Further, it is, of course, the variation within the source texts themselves that allows the later Vedāntin commentators to hold such radically different interpretations of what the Upaniṣads teach (see Chapter 19).

Key questions

One way of pursuing a close reading through these differences is to locate the questions that different sages or texts are addressing. In particular, Roebuck stresses the ubiquity of the question: “What do you worship as *brahman*?” (Roebuck 2003: 448, n.1). This is a central query whose answers are multiple; it builds on the riddling competitions between brahmins (*brāhmaṇas*) in the earlier Vedic texts (Renou 1949; Black 2007, Chapter 2). The preoccupation with personal immortality yields another key line of enquiry (e.g. BU 3.2.10–13; 4.4) and becomes linked to the nature of the self. Naciketas famously presses Yama, “Tell us ... what there is in the great passing-on [beyond death]?”⁵ His question yields the teaching on *ātman* (KU 1.29, 2.20).

These questions generate others and shape the older teacher-pupil dialogues and the literary form of later texts. The *Śvetāśvatara*, for example, opens with a string of questions from those who talk about *brahman*:

What is the cause or *brahman*? why are we born? by what do we live? on what are we grounded? ... are we to think of it as time, inherent nature, fate, chance, the elements, a womb, a person? or a combination of these?
(1.1–2)

The very titles of the *Praśna* (“question”) and *Kena* (“by what?”) show the importance of questioning. *Praśna* 3 asks the revered teacher, Pippalāda:

Where is the breath born from? how does it enter this body? how, having divided itself (*ātman*), does it become established? by what does it go up [out of the body at death]? how does it explain what is external [the cosmos] and what is to do with oneself (*adhyātma*)?

The shape of this chapter

To address these questions, I consider key ideas and close readings from broadly chronological groups of the principal Upaniṣads to see what different answers they give, before returning to the initial puzzle of how *brahman* and *ātman* are related.⁶

The early prose Upaniṣads

In the oldest prose Upaniṣads, searches for answers are frequently conducted in dialogues (e.g. BU 3; CU 1.8–9; 5.11–24; BU 2.1; 2.4//4.5; 4.3–4; KsU 1–2). They are both embodied and socially embedded: what do *you* worship as *brahman*? This alerts us to three issues. The first is to consider whether one normative view on *brahman/ātman* is provided. Black suggests that, in the competitive debates in the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (3; 4.1–4), where Yājñavalkya emerges as victor, a single view on *brahman* is sanctioned. By contrast, the assorted teachings given by different teachers in the *Chāndogya* are allowed to stand alongside each other (2007: 43, 97, 169). Second, perspectives on *brahman* relate variously to earlier Vedic ritual and hymnic views (CU throughout; BU 1.1, 1.2–4, 5 and 6). These views are not easily homogenised. Finally, though, I argue that different types of material and shifting vocabulary in adjacent sections of these texts are not just indicators of collections made over time or different teachers' views. Rather, in the compilations we now have, the format of the texts forces the hearer or reader to confront a search for something contested and highly elusive. This works in the hearer, where a tidy, coherent answer could not.

To approach this diversity, I consider four ways the early prose Upaniṣads handle the relation between the cosmos and the individual. Each builds on ideas of macrocosm (the cosmos), microcosm (the sacrificer), and mesocosm (the sacrifice which maintains cosmic and social order) from earlier Vedic texts. This approach allows us to see both connections and divergences as these texts pursue questions about the meaning of existence, seeking a grasp of that which grounds the cosmos and may be found within.

Understanding homologies (bandhus): What do you seek as brahman? as self? why?

Bandhus are the links between different realms which provide an underpinning logic for sacrifice or meditation (Gonda 1965; Smith 1989; cf. Renou 1949: 13). The *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (1.1) opens with a meditation in which the horse, sacrificed to establish a king's power and territory, is equated with the whole cosmos. Re-death is overcome through proper understanding of the horse-sacrifice (1.2.7), power derived from a knowledge of

the homologies between, here, the parts of the horse and the parts of the cosmos to which they correspond: dawn its head, wind its breath, its body (*ātman*) the year representing the totality of time. It is through the exploration of such *bandhus* that many of the protagonists in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya* seek the connecting whole, or *brahman*.

CU 3.18.2–6, for example, identifies the “four quarters of *brahman*” as speech/fire, breath/air, eye/sun, and ear/directions. Each quarter of the whole has both an individual identification and a cosmological homologue, linked through meditation. The one who knows these links “shines with praise, fame and the shine of *brahman*,” here “sacred knowledge.” Olivelle’s translation makes transparent the homology generating this knowledge:

With respect to the bodily sphere (*ātman*), one should venerate: “*Brahman* is the mind,” and, with respect to the divine sphere: “*Brahman* is space.” In this way, [meditative] substitution is carried out in both spheres – both with respect to the bodily sphere [*adhyātma*] and with respect to the divine sphere [*adhidaivata*].

(CU 3.18.1, tr. Olivelle)⁷

It is not a long step from here to the famous “Inner Controller” passage in BU 3.7, which talks not of *brahman* but of *ātman*. Challenged to demonstrate his knowledge of “that thread by which this world, the other world and all beings are held together” and its *antaryāmin*, or inner controller, Yājñavalkya gives a three-part series of almost identically worded teachings:

The one who exists within earth/all beings/breath, is other than earth/all beings/breath, whom earth/all beings/breath do not know, whose body is earth/all beings/breath, who controls earth/all beings/breath from within – this is your self, the inner controller, the immortal (*eṣa ta ātmāntaryāmy amṛtaḥ*).

(3.7.3/15/16 as examples)

The series relates respectively to the cosmic realm of the deities (*adhidaivata*), the hinge realm of “beings” (*adhibhūta*), and the final realm of “*adhyātma*.” Olivelle translates “*adhyātma*” as “body,” recalling earlier homologisations: now the search within cosmos and body leads to a single reality, the inner controller, the immortal self within. Roebuck’s “oneself” relates this search to the pupil hearing the teaching and, like the whole passage, directs him to find it, and immortality, within his own person.

Whole and parts: What is brahman, the one that “exceeds”?

We have already seen examples of “*ātman*” and “*brahman*” denoting a whole with parts (BU 1.1–2; CU 3.18). In CU 4.4–4.9, the aptly named

Satyakāma (“One-who-desires-what-is-true”) is taught one “quarter of *brahman*” by a bull, fire, goose, and water-bird respectively. Each quarter represents a totality: the four directions; the four regions; the lights of fire, sun, moon, and lightning; the person (breath, eye, ear, mind). Satyakāma gained knowledge of *brahman* (4.9.2), with various limited results (4.5.4, 4.6.4, 4.7.4, 4.8.4), but the complete knowledge in which “nothing was left out” comes from his teacher (4.9.3; cf. 5.11–24). On its content, the text is silent.

The implied transcendence of something beyond our conceptions of “totality” is made clear in CU 3.12. Different levels of totality – ritual, cosmic, and person-related – are elaborately equated, but “the Person is *greater than that!* One quarter of him is all beings/ Three quarters, the immortal in the sky” (CU 3.12.6 citing RV 10.90.3). This, it implies, is “that which is called *brahman*,” the space both outside a person and within (3.12.7), yielding unfading prosperity. Śāṇḍilya’s teaching goes further. “*brahman*,” “all this” (3.14.1) *is* the self within the heart yet greater than all worlds (3.14.3). With the intention to know the self (*ātman*), one enters or attains *brahman*, the totality, transcendent, after death (3.14.4). Through the parts, to the whole, to that beyond.

Origination stories: What is the cause? The end?

The oldest Upaniṣads contain numerous “In the beginning” stories. In many, the self (*ātman*) is the initiator. In *Aitareya Upaniṣad* 1.1 the self, “one only,” thinks, “Let me create worlds,” the cosmos is produced and the self “enters” the person as the cogniser within (1.3.11–12; cf. *sat*, “Being,” in CU 6.2).

In some stories (e.g. CU 6), *brahman* is not mentioned. Here, the lonely self⁸ sees “just that person, the *brahman*” (1.3.13) and so is called Idandra. As 1.3.14 observes, “The gods seem to love the cryptic”! 3.1–4 attempts to untangle the mystery. To the question, “Which one is the *self*?” (3.2), a string of terms designating different aspects of cognition is given. The translators vary in how they interpret the relation between the one who sees, hears, smells, speaks, and tastes (3.1); the separate mental functions, gods, elements, and beings; and *brahman* as *prajñāna* (intelligence, knowledge, knowing). What do you worship as *brahman*? Search within the cosmos and yourself.

Taittirīya 2 explores the connection between origination, the attaining of all desires for the one who knows *brahman* and an interiorising search within. In what becomes known as the “five sheaths” passage, comments and verses direct one from a kind of exterior Russian doll, “the self made of food,” to the next one within, “the self made of breath,” then to “the self made of mind,” “of understanding,” and finally “of bliss.” Whichever sheath or “self” a person identifies as *brahman*, they attain a concomitant outcome. Finally, depending on whether the seeker sees *brahman* as non-being or being, the

result is different and questions arise over destiny after death (2.6). Resolution transcends both “being” and “non-being” origination accounts (2.7,8):

Whence words return/ along with the mind;
the one who knows the bliss of *brahman* / does not fear anything
at all (2.9).

That end is beyond words.

Unseen seer: What is the self?

The Yājñavalkya cycle (BU 2–4) repeatedly identifies the *ātman* as the ground of cognition. The Inner Controller passage concludes:

It is the unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought-of thinker, the unknown knower. Other than this there is no seer; other than this there is no hearer; other than this there is no thinker; other than this there is no knower. This is your self, the inner controller, the immortal: what is other than this is suffering.

(BU 3.7.23, tr. Roebuck; cf. 3.8.11; KsU 3.8)

This has become a prevalent understanding not least because of its use by the Advaitin commentator, Śaṅkara, yet it is less common in the principal Upaniṣads than might be expected.⁹ What it does share is the search, within cosmos and self, for a transcendent principle which in various ways is identified with consciousness, though methods and pictures vary widely as already indicated.

Another way of searching for this starts with an outward bodily self, then moves through dream and deep sleep to a transcendent consciousness beyond. This is most neatly formalised in the much later *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, but its roots are found in the oldest Upaniṣads including *Chāndogya* 8.7–12. Prajāpati, linking senses with cosmic elements, teaches that the self is that which grounds all sensing and thinking, using a colourful picture of fulfilled desires to point Indra beyond waking, dreaming, deep sleep to “the self free from evils, old age, sorrow and death” (8.7–12).

The flavour is very different in Yājñavalkya’s teaching to Maitreyī. He gives her a series of examples to illustrate how everything is the self (*ātman*, 2.4.6), culminating in the image of salt dissolved in water. Just so, a person, who arises from various elements, at death will dissolve back into them and there will be no more awareness:

For where there is duality as it were, there one smells another, sees another, hears another, speaks to another, thinks of another, knows another. When however all in one has become the self/one’s self (*ātman*), what could one smell by what? ... what could one know by what? by what could one know that by which all this is known? By what can one know the knower?

(BU 2.4.14)

No cognition of difference can remain. Yet the knower – the unknown knower of BU 3.7.23 – remains. Beyond words. The parallel passage in BU 4.5.15 uses radically apophatic language to stress this: “That is this self (*ātman*), said to be, ‘No, no,’” that which no language can describe.

A similar impulse for what is beyond cognition underlies Uddālaka Āruṇi’s question to his arrogant son, Śvetaketu:

Did you ask for the teaching by which the unheard becomes heard, the unthought thought, and the unknown known?

(6.1.2–3)

This engenders a series of examples containing the famous *tat tvam asi* teaching, “You are that.” Perhaps no other Upaniṣadic phrase has occasioned so much scholarly discussion, whether by Vedāntin commentators,¹⁰ or by modern textual scholars.¹¹ In the *Chāndogya* narrative, Śvetaketu is the one addressed as “you.” “That” is *sat*, Being, which thinks, “May I be many.” Clearly the arrogant pupil is not the source of everything. His father explains:

This subtle part is what all this has as self. It is truth; it is the self (*ātman*).
You are that, Śvetaketu.

(6.8.7, tr. Roebuck)

“All this,” the cosmos, has transcendent Being for its self. This is also the core of Śvetaketu’s being. His existence, goal, very life, and truthfulness have this subtle essence as self (6.13–16).

These searches within the cosmos and within the person for the answers to the fundamental questions of life recur in the middle and late Upaniṣads. The next section considers three middle period verse texts as case studies for how they explore our vital but slippery terms.

The verse Upaniṣads: *Kena*, *Īśā*, and *Muṇḍaka*

Kena on brahman

Both parts of the *Kena Upaniṣad* are focused on *brahman* though in different ways. Metric chapters 1–2 are a poetic meditation on the elusive power which lies behind the individual’s mind, speech, and senses, reminiscently described as the “hearing behind hearing, the thinking behind thinking, the speech behind speech, the sight behind sight” but also “the breathing behind breathing” (1.2). The hearer is repeatedly adjured to learn that only this is *brahman*, not what others regard as their highest power. The person who thinks they know *brahman* well is challenged to consider not the visible aspect of *brahman* but that which is unknown (2.3). Paradoxically it is those who do not perceive it who do. Not content to identify *brahman* with an aspect of the cosmos perhaps, they recognise its transcendence and gain immortality (2.5).

Prose chapters 3–4 contain a variation on the recurring competition among gods, or the breaths, over who is the greatest. Here the elusive *brahman* is the challenger and winner. “*brahman*,” then, is the highest power, whether in philosophical poetry or a somewhat anthropomorphised, though still uncapturable, form in prose. It is known in relation to a person’s mind and senses, mythically explains the god Indra’s power and yields immortality beyond death. The term “*ātman*” is not used.

Īśā on ātman

By contrast, in the short *Īśā*, the term “*brahman*” does not feature. Its references to the self are ambiguous, as is its opening: everything is to be pervaded or perfumed by a powerful one/the Lord (*īśā*, 1).¹² A neuter “One” is described in paradoxes: unmoving, yet swifter than the mind, beyond gods, far and near, within and without (4–5). The next verse, in words reminiscent of BU 4.4.15, and adapted theistically in BhG 6.30, reads: “Whoever sees/ All beings in the self (*ātman*)/ And the self in all beings/Does not shrink away from it” (6, tr. Roebuck). Roebuck keeps this ambiguous on purpose. Is one to see all beings in oneself? Or in the (supreme) self? And is this a theistic Upaniṣad, identifying supreme self, the “One” and God?¹³ Or is *īś* to be equated with the “great self,” the indwelling overseer of all, as in BU 2.5.15?¹⁴

Muṇḍaka on both

In the *Muṇḍaka*, the knowledge of *brahman* is intimately bound up with understanding “*ātman*.” As elsewhere, this term has several senses. In a famous analogy, the *Muṇḍaka* compares the syllable *Om* with a bow, the self (*ātman*) with an arrow and *brahman* with the target to be struck (2.2.4). So it appears that the individual self, sharpened with meditation, is to be drawn back ready to fire “with the mind fixed on the nature of that,” i.e. *brahman* (2.2.3). This idea of an individual self refined by meditation is reinforced when a person who knows the supreme place of *brahman*, their desires completely satisfied, is described as *kṛtātma* (3.2.2, cf. *yuktātma* 3.2.5), “one whose self is perfected.”

The relation of the self to the cosmic person (*puruṣa*), the source and upholder of all things (2.1), “higher than the highest” (3.2.8), and to *brahman*, the immortal which extends in all directions (2.2.12), yet is subtler than the subtle (2.2.2), is never stated straightforwardly. Yet it is knowledge of the self which unites the self with *brahman* as the arrow with the target (2.2.4); it is *brahman*, free from stain or parts, the radiant light of lights, which is known by knowers of the self (*ātma-vidāḥ* 2.2.10). The self is both in the body, known through consciousness into which the breath/senses are woven, and that on which the three cosmic regions are woven (3.1.9; 2.2.5, cf. BU 3.6, 3.8). The destination of tranquil knowers (1.2.11) of *brahman* is the immortal, cosmic person, the imperishable self (*avyayātma*, 1.2.11),¹⁵ whose feet are “the inmost self (*antarātma*) of all beings” (2.1.4).¹⁶ These are subtle equations, working

from where a person is, drawing out the inner and cosmic knowledge which will unite the knower with the divine person, as individual name and form are lost, like rivers flowing into an ocean (3.2.8). The prose re-links intention and outcome: “One who knows the highest *brahman* indeed becomes *brahman*” (3.2.9).

A personalising turn? *Kaṭha* and *Śvetāśvatara*

Lord, ātman, and brahman in *Śvetāśvatara*

While Olivelle sees the *Kena*, *Īśā*, and *Muṇḍaka* as having “strong theistic tendencies” (1996: xxxvii), this is perhaps more noticeable in the *Kaṭha* and *Śvetāśvatara*. The deity in the *Śvetāśvatara* is Rudra, described as “*śiva*,” auspicious or gentle (3.11). The relationship between *ātman* and *brahman* to this Lord (*īśa*), the God/god (*deva*) who upholds all there is (1.8) is, as we would now expect, slippery. Signifieds are constantly open to interpretation. Verses from earlier texts are quoted and integrated. Networks of associations lie within the poetic process.¹⁷

What is clear is the supremacy of the “One,” Rudra/Savitṛ, the Lord, the God, pervasive, total yet transcendent source of all (1.10). He is the one to be known as distinct from the individual self (*jīva*) and from mind-matter (*prakṛti*).¹⁸ To know him, one should use, but go beyond, yogic practices of finding the “One” within (2.14–15), and be devoted to this “One,” as to one’s teacher (6.23). Around this core are woven numerous uses of the terms “*brahman*” and “*ātman*.” The different translations of Olivelle and Roebuck show the decisions of interpretation required. I outline two sets here.

First, we are to understand that sorting out various views of “those who speak of *brahman*” is the aim of the Upaniṣad (1.1). Depending on how the first of many questions in 1.1 is translated,¹⁹ we might identify *brahman* as that cause (rather than time, inherent nature, fate, and so on), the one who transcends all. Or we might ask what the cause of *brahman* is, perhaps as in 2.7, the “sacred Vedic formula.” The world or wheel of *brahman* is that of rebirth, whether controlling or controlled by it (1.6). Finally, though, *brahman* is identified as the substance of *Śvetāśvatara*’s correct teaching (6.21; cf. 2.15), that is, the view on the Lord. “*brahman*” therefore continues to designate the best understanding, “that which exceeds.”

Second, there is a key shift in meaning of “*ātman*,” in one of its most important usages in the *Śvetāśvatara*. Here the *ātman* is subject to pleasure and pain (1.2), differentiated from the powerful one or Lord, and is the individual experiencer of objects of experience. It is compared with a bird sitting on a tree pecking fruit, or a male goat after “enjoying” the female (4.5–7; cf. MU 3.1). It is the self as involved in the world of rebirth. With perishable *prakṛti*, it is ruled over by the one God (1.10), a triad identified in 1.12 as “the threefold *brahman*.” It can be freed by recognising this (cf. MU 3.2.2 where the self can be perfected). Yet “*ātman*” can also designate the Lord, the

all-pervading self, which is the secret teaching on *brahman* (*brahmopaniṣad*), found within oneself (1.15–16). Old themes of the whole and transcendence, of finding the self within, become transmuted through a lens of personal deity as supreme self, now differentiated from the individual self, using the new techniques of yoga (see Chapters 17 and 32).

Self, selves, and the elusive goal in Kaṭha

In the *Kaṭha*, Naciketas searches for immortality. Death (Yama) finally teaches him about the one who is not born, does not die, does not originate, does not become, and is not killed when the body is (2.18), whom Olivelle, along with 2.20, identifies as *ātman*:

Subtler than the subtle, greater than the great,
the self (*ātman*) is hidden in the secret (heart) of a living being.

This could refer to an individual self yet remains ambiguous. As in earlier texts, this *ātman* is described in paradoxical terms: “Sitting, it moves far, lying it goes everywhere” (2.21; cf. IU 5). Ordinary methods of intellectual learning do not avail in finding the self (cf. MU 3.2.3). It is grasped by the one to whom it reveals its own nature (or chooses as its own body) (2.23).²⁰ Personal Lord? Or self-disclosing consciousness to the one who looks?

In KU 3, a Sāṃkhya-like hierarchy of senses, sense objects, mind (*manas*), intellect (*buddhi*), “great self” (*ātmā mahān*), and unmanifest (*avyakta*) leads to the “Person” (*puruṣa*), beyond which is nothing (3.10–11). This is the highest goal: The chariot journey’s end, the furthest step of Viṣṇu,²¹ the “tranquil self,” into which has been merged the “great self” and before that the “knowing self” (3.13).²² Different senses of self – individual cognitive (*jñānātma*) and universal cosmic (*ātman mahat*) – are transcended in that tranquil self (*śāntātman*), the final stage. Ultimately, that which frees from death is seen to be “without sound, touch, or form, imperishable, without taste, eternal, without smell, without beginning or end, greater than the great, constant.” Radhakrishnan glosses as “self” (3.15 tr.). The text simply has pronouns. Once more, juxtapositions suggest; words push beyond.

Tidying things up: *Praśna* and *Māṇḍūkya*

The Praśna’s pastiche

The *Praśna* incorporates an archaic medley of teachings relating them overall to “the highest *brahman*, higher than which there is nothing” (6.7; cf. KU 3.11). The self emerges as immortal, the final end (1.9), the foundation of breath (*prāṇa*) (3.3), residing within the heart (3.6). As the “highest self,” it is the foundation of all the elements and aspects of an individual person (4.7). The “knowing self” (*vijñānātman*, cf. KU 3.13), probably individual here,

is the one who sees, touches, tastes, smells, thinks, knows, and acts. It rests on, or is established in, the supreme imperishable self, the two apparently distinguished.

The fourth beyond

By contrast, the brief *Māṇḍūkya* systematically reflects on the syllable Om and its four quarters, equated to the states of waking, dreaming, deep sleep and the fourth (*turīya*) beyond (2–7). “This *brahman*” is the whole cosmos; past, present, future, and what is beyond – the familiar theme of the whole and that which transcends it. Famously, “this self is *brahman*” (1), in particular, the fourth beyond. It too is described by paradox and negation: without inside or outside, unseen, ungraspable, indescribable; tranquil; without a second (7). It is beyond the conventional world of ordinary transactions (*avyavahārya*), auspicious (*śiva*), non-dual (*advaita*), the stilling of the manifested world (*prapañcopaśama*). By knowing the self through meditative reflection on these quarters which lead beyond, “one enters the self through oneself” (12).²³ With BU 4.5.13, this becomes central to an Advaitin understanding of *brahman* and *ātman*.²⁴

Is *ātman* identical to *brahman*? Reconsidering the question

This important philosophical question has often been considered in terms primarily of ultimate reality (*brahman*). How is the eternal self (*ātman*), that which provides the continuity between the different births of an individual and seeks escape from that cycle, related to this causal reality? Are they identical? The same but different? Non-reciprocally dependent in a single complex reality? Different in important ways but contingent in being? Or what? And is that ultimate reality: beyond all words and characteristics, a personal Lord to be worshipped, or what? (see Chapters 15 and 19).

Close reading of the texts and their own questions in light of Indological, and more recent literary/narrative, approaches can lead us to approach the issue from a different angle. First, consider “*brahman*” as a question-poser like in the old *brahmodya* riddling and “*ātman*” as a multi-vocal term yielding a rich view of what it is to be (a) person. The former focuses on the best way of understanding the highest value, the secret given in the cosmos and in the particular transmission from teacher to pupil, the totality which incorporates earlier partial understandings, the transcendent which exceeds the known whole. The latter recalls the person-shaped images through which seers explored the nature of the cosmos, its origin and manifest plurality, from the dismembered Cosmic Person to the self within all. It reminds us that body, breath, vital functions, cognitive processes and subject consciousness itself have all been explored as *brahman*, the secret of the whole. It prompts us to explore different “types” or “layers” of self- or personhood: the bodily waking, dream, deep sleep, and transcendent selves of the early Upaniṣads and

the *Māṇḍūkya*; the perfectable self of the *Muṇḍaka*'s *ṛtātma*; the sāmkhya-yogic-like analyses of the *Kaṭha*'s knowing self, great self, and tranquil self, than which nothing is higher.

To the modern student of the Upaniṣadic texts, the question about the relation of *ātman* to *brahman* then becomes: What is disclosed in a close reading of this teacher's view? This assembled text's juxtapositions? This integration, summary or refinement of earlier positions? How is this shaped by renegotiations of the relation between macrocosm and microcosm? Of the search within?

Extending the exploration narratively, the question about "*brahman*" asks what the hearer-reader, addressed in and through the stories' characters and questions, values most. Within a wider narrative context of pedagogy, transmission, and social relations, it asks, "What do *you* hold most dear? For what reasons? What are the methods for finding it?" For the modern student, attention to these questions can foster an understanding of the *method* of these texts in their elusive, allusive inter- and intratextual promptings to consider what is already grasped and what is yet to be known.

And for the modern philosophical theologian, the question of the relation of *ātman* to *brahman* now invites a richer investigation of relations of personhood to the transcendent,²⁵ but that is a story for another day.

Notes

- 1 Cf. Paul Deussen on the identity of "the cosmical and the psychical principle": "This [idealist] thought which first makes its appearance in the discourses of Yājñavalkya in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka is never again surrendered, and dominates, it is true with certain empirical modifications ..., the entire development of the doctrine of the Upaniṣads up to its conclusion with Bādarāyaṇa [author of Vedānta's *Brahma-sūtras*] and Śaṅkara [key non-dualist Vedāntin]" (1906: 132). Hume 1931: 29.
- 2 Life: Renou 1952; breath: e.g. KsU 2.1, 2.2, 2.14, 3.4; person: e.g. CU 3.12.6; BU 1.4.1; KsU 4.4; SU 3.
- 3 *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 1.1.1; *Taittirīya-Upaniṣad-Bhāṣya* 2.1. cf. Gonda, 1950: 18–31, "*brahman*" as generative grounding. Renou tentatively linked it with √*valh*-, suggesting a primary Vedic sense of "*brāhman*" as "enigma" (1949: 21).
- 4 "Brahma" is also found in older translations for this neuter term (e.g. Hume 1931), and should not be confused with "Brahmā," the male creator deity. Sometimes, the Sanskrit is ambiguous, e.g. BU 6.5.3: Radhakrishnan: "Brahmā"; Olivelle: "Brahman."
- 5 All translations mine unless indicated.
- 6 For a thematic introduction, Brereton 1990.
- 7 In CU 1.6–7, *adhidaivata* and *adhyātma* are homologised with the Rg verse and Sāman chant. The two categories occur throughout the *Chāndogya*.
- 8 Cf. BU 1.2.4–5; 1.4.2–3, Roebuck 2000: 266, n.21.
- 9 PU 9 and MaU 7 take up but adapt.
- 10 Madhva splits as "*atat tvam asi*" (Stoker n.d.).
- 11 Brereton 1986, followed by Olivelle, critiqued by Roebuck 2003: 423, n.12.
- 12 See Roebuck's excellent footnote (2003: 390, n.3).

- 13 To read 15–18 as obviously theistic, whether intentional (Olivelle) or interpolated (Thieme 1965), seems strange. In BU 5.15, it is the prayer of a dying person to the sungod/god of death.
- 14 Cf. Thieme 1965: 89–90.
- 15 Or, “whose self is imperishable.”
- 16 See Olivelle using Hertel’s critical edition (1996: 271).
- 17 Olivelle suggests its integration of earlier views explains its “chaotic” appearance (1996: 252; cf. BhG). While some quotations do not easily fit grammar or theme (Killingley 1983: 10, see Roebuck, 2003: 454, n.7), the *Śvetāśvatara*’s juxtapositions and “shape-shifting” are continuous in method with earlier texts pushing the seeker beyond.
- 18 On the terminology of unsystematised proto-Sāṃkhya and Yoga used in this text, Johnston 1930; Larson 1979: 100–102.
- 19 Roebuck 2000: 339 n.2; Olivelle 1996: 253; Gonda 1950: 10: “What is the cause? Is it brahman?”, or, “Is the cause brahman?”
- 20 *yamevaiṣa vṛṇute tena labhyas tasyaiṣa ātmā vivṛṇute tanūṃ svaṃ*.
- 21 For the myth of Viṣṇu’s three steps, see e.g. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.2.5; RV 1.22.20a; RV 1.154.5d (Hume 1931: 352, n.1).
- 22 On the fourteenth-century Yogic Advaitin Vidyāraṇya’s comment, Madaio 2016, 4.3. On the “great self,” van Buitenen 1964.
- 23 *saṃviśaty ātmanātmānam*
- 24 E.g. Śaṅkara’s *Gauḍapādīya-Kārikā-Bhāṣya*.
- 25 Cf. Ram-Prasad 2013.

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