

Essay Self: East and West HPPH7013
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January 2021
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(4036 words)

Conduct a critical analysis of Upanishadic perspectives on self

Brahman

In order to critically analyse any perspectives or concepts, it is important to be acquainted with what the underlying system of thought is or as Foucault (1972) calls it, what the primary grid or 'episteme' is, meaning "the hidden network that determines the way things confront one another". This is important because "the episteme determines the set of possible objects of explicit knowledge" and therefore the episteme also "determines what is expressible within a discourse." (Ganeri 2018)

In order to critically analyse the perspectives of self in the Upanishads we need to get acquainted with the episteme of the Upanishads, that which underpins the Upanishadic system of thought. A criticism might be that it is impossible for someone coming from a different episteme to fully engage in critical discourse about knowledge that is underpinned by another episteme. I think this is a valid argument, but I also think that capacities for critical reasoning are universal for all humans. A mathematician who grew up with the decimal system can learn how to do maths in a duodecimal system and can see when an error is made. In the same way I think it is perfectly possible to critically engage in the Upanishadic system of thought as a philosopher with a Western background, for example to see where theories are not logically consistent.

The episteme in the Upanishads is most of the time labelled *brahman*, which is that principle, force or power that lies behind the world; brahman is what makes the world explicable (Brereton, 1990). Although the term brahman isn't used in all the texts to name the unifying principle, in this essay I will refer to brahman as the Upanishadic episteme.

The problem with 'knowing' or 'understanding' any episteme is that the "episteme determines the set of possible objects of explicit knowledge," and thus it is "not itself a possible object of explicit knowledge" (2018). "Likewise, since the episteme determines what is expressible within a discourse, it is not itself expressible within that discourse." And this is exactly what we see in the Upanishads.

Throughout the Upanishads the role of the concept of brahman is to be the unifying cosmic principle, for example in the Katha Upanishad (all translations are from Olivelle 1996):

*That which is the hearing behind hearing,
the thinking behind thinking,
the speech behind speech,*

*the sight behind sight –
It is also the breathing behind breathing (KU 1.2)*

However,

*Which one cannot see with one's sight,
by which one sees the sight itself –
Learn that that alone is brahman (KU 1.6)*

As we can see in this verse brahman is not to be seen, because it is that 'by which one sees the sight itself'. This expresses the idea that episteme is unknowable and inexpressible. This point is made even more clearly by the sage Yājñavalkya in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad when he says:

"You can't see the seer who does the seeing; you can't hear the hearer who does the hearing; you can't think of the thinker who does the thinking; and you can't perceive the perceiver who does the perceiving" (BU 3.4.2).

Brahman is the self (Atman)

The reason that the episteme, brahman, is such an important concept when we want to analyse the perspectives on self in the Upanishads, is because of what Ganeri calls a "dramatic move" (Adamson and Ganeri 2020) in these works. Which is the idea in the Upanishads that "the single reality behind the multiple aspects of the world is also the reality of the individual." (2018) A recurrent theme in Upanishads is that one's true self, often referred to as atman, is to be identified with brahman, with this ultimate reality:

"Clearly, this self is brahman—this self that is made of perception, made of mind, made of sight, made of breath, made of hearing, made of earth, made of water, made of wind, made of space, made of light and the lightless, made of desire and the desireless, made of anger and the angerless, made of the righteous and the unrighteous; this self that is made of everything." BU 4.4.5

The problem is, if we have found brahman to be elusive because it is so fundamental that it cannot be understood and the self is to be *equated* with brahman, then for the same reasons the self must be elusive too. But maybe we can get some insight into the self when we know a bit more about what kind of principle brahman is?

Unfortunately, although all through the Upanishads we find the idea of one cosmic principle which is often referred to as brahman, what this principle *is* "remains an open concept" as Brereton argues (1990). Throughout the Upanishads, the nature of the unifying principle is described in numerous ways, examples being: consciousness, truth, bliss, knowledge, joy and creation. Its properties just as numerous, being amongst others: without origin, omnipotent, beyond time and space, both personal and impersonal, stationary and moving, not subject to change. Brahman is everything *and* its negation, something which then must be true for the self as well, and indeed Yājñavalkya argues that the only thing that can be said about the self is "*neti-, neti-*" or "*not-, not-,*" (BU 2.3.6)

To state that brahman is 'everything' and that therefore your true self is part of 'brahman' seems like stating the obvious. But fortunately, it is not that simple. There is one thing that can be said about brahman from reading the Upanishads, and that is that whatever its true nature is, it is not to be found in the phenomenal, material world. In order to get as close to brahman as we can, to gain knowledge of 'reality', we need to turn our eye inward. This is another common thread in the Upanishads; in order gain knowledge of brahman and with that of oneself, we need to look inside ourselves. The true self is to be found within oneself. And what's more, a common theme in the Upanishads is the idea that to know oneself one not simply *knows* brahman, but one *becomes* brahman; one becomes one's true self and with that one becomes immortal.

"If a man knows "I am brahman" in this way, he becomes this whole world. Not even the gods are able to prevent it, for he becomes their very self (atman)." BU 1.4.7

Man can become immortal by knowing its true self, however for those people who do not know themselves truly, their faith is to be reborn in the material world.

*With your mind alone you must understand it
there is here no diversity at all!
From death to death he goes, who sees
here any kind of diversity. KU 4.11*

Immortality and rebirth are, without explicitly being argued for, commonly accepted principles in the Upanishads. It is a kind of knowledge that, as I see it, is taken for granted in the system of thought. However, I want to argue that in order to critically analyse the concepts of self in these texts, the concepts of immortality and of rebirth are crucial. Because if it isn't the *self* that becomes immortal or is reborn, the question then is what the concepts contain and what their use is in the discourse? I think that there is a tension between the ideas of a self as human being, a self that is reborn in another body, a self that escapes the cycle of rebirth and becomes immortal and a self which is identified in one way or another with ultimate reality, with brahman. In the next part I will therefore focus on what happens with man, the human being, after physical death, because if we gain more insight in how the principles of immortality and rebirth work, we might get closer to the Upanishadic nature of a self and see if the tensions are resolved.

The self and death

In BU2.4.12-14 Yājñavalkya compares brahman to salt dissolved in water:

"In the same way this Immense Being has no limit or boundary and is a single mass of perception. It arises out of and together with these beings and disappears after them—so I say, after death there is no awareness."

The reason there is no awareness after death is because *"this body, you see, has the capacity to perceive. For when there is a duality of some kind, then the one can smell the other, the one can see the other... When, however, the Whole has become one's very self (atman), then who is there for one to smell and by what means?..."*

"by what means can one perceive the perceiver?"

And in BU2.5 14-15 we read:

... The radiant and immortal person in the self and the radiant and immortal person connected with the body (atman)—they are both one's self. It is the immortal; it is brahman; it is the Whole.

... This very self (atman) is the lord and king of all beings. ... to one's self (atman) are fastened all beings, all the gods, all the worlds, all the breaths, and all these bodies (atman).

Brahman is this self (atman) here which perceives everything.

Read from the end to the beginning, in this teaching brahman seems to be the hidden connection between all beings, everything is connected through and in Brahman. One's self *is* brahman, connected to one's body *and* with all beings. After death we become one with the Whole, we dissolve as it were in brahman, there is no awareness anymore, there is no duality and therefore no individuality anymore. This account of loss of individuality after death raises the question how a self without awareness relates to the human being that *is* aware? After all it is the human being who is being told that after death, she will not be aware anymore. There simply is nothing to be aware of; but in what way then will *this human being* have survived death?

And if we assume the principle of rebirth, how does such a non-aware, non-individual self, which is dissolved in brahman, find its way back to individuality when it is reborn? These questions also arise from the famous teaching of Udalakka to his son Śvetaketu in the Chāndogya Upanishad. (CU6.1-16) Here through metaphor the idea is expressed that the world of many, the phenomenal world emerges from a single unity and that everything eventually resolves back into that unity.

"It is like this, son. By means of just one lump of clay one would perceive everything made of clay—the transformation is a verbal handle, a name—while the reality is just this: 'It's clay.'

... in the beginning this world was simply what is existent—one only, without a second. "And it thought to itself: 'Let me become many. Let me propagate myself.'

"When a man is dying, my son, his speech merges into his mind; his mind, into his breath; his breath, into heat; and heat, into the highest deity. "The finest essence here—that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth; that is the self (atman). And that's how you are, Śvetaketu."

"Now, take these rivers, son. ... they merge into the very ocean; they become just the ocean. In that state they are not aware that: 'I am that river,' and 'I am this river.' In exactly the same way, son, when all these creatures reach the existent, they are not aware that: 'We are reaching the existent.'

After death, the self becomes one with brahman, like the river flowing into the ocean. After death there is only one, not many, we are all 'clay'. This idea we also find in the Mundaka Upanishad in the analogies of the spider and the fire with the one and the many:

As a spider spins out threads, then draws them into itself;... (MU1.1.7)

As from a well-stoked fire sparks fly by the thousands, all looking just like it,

So from the imperishable issue diverse things, and into it, my friend, they return. (MU2.2.1)

Both teachings leave room for individuality in the phenomenal world; the pots of clay are real just like the threads and the sparks are real. We need to realize however that in their essence the pots *are* clay, the threads *are* the spider and the fire sparks *are* fire and in the end they will return to their essence, they will return to the imperishable. This idea of returning to the imperishable, like the rivers to the ocean seems to be make rebirth logically impossible. If a river flows into the ocean, how could you find the river back in the ocean to be reborn?

Or should we see the idea of unawareness as something temporal? That there are still many 'in the ocean' however there is no awareness of that? The many are temporally in some state of deep sleep? But then the problem arises of how there can be many in the One, in brahman? Should we consider the selves as some aspects of brahman, or is there some other way how the human beings are related to the reborn human beings?

This question is addressed by Yājñavalkya a bit further in BU 3.13

"Yājñavalkya," Artabhaga said again, "tell me—when a man has died, and his speech disappears into fire, his breath into the wind, his sight into the sun,... what then happens to that person?"

The answer is that *"A man turns into something good by good action and into something bad by bad action."*

What is left of man after death are his actions, recorded in some cosmic bookkeeping, but the question then might be, what are these actions connected to? Or do these actions *reconnect* to an aspect of brahman the moment there is rebirth taking place? How can we find the self in these actions? A possible interpretation, which appeals to me, might be that all beings are connected in brahman and that in doing good actions in this life some better human being is born in the future. This person, being brahman himself, is *me* in a transtemporal sense. By doing good actions we can make the world a better place also for future generations, generations to which we are connected by our true selves, which, again, is brahman. Such a theory provides a foundation for a theory of moral responsibility; however, I don't see how such a theory can account for the idea of immortality. And an essential part in almost all teachings is that we can escape the cycle of rebirth and become immortal. How does that work?

In the Chandogya Upnaishad we find that to escape the cycle of rebirth you need to discover that self that is in the fort of brahman.

*"That does not age,
as this body grows old;
That is not killed,
when this body is slain—
That is the real fort of brahman,
in it are contained all desires." (CU 8.2.7)*

"...when he is departing from this body, he rises up along those same rays. ... he reaches the sun. It is the door to the farther world, open to those who have the knowledge but closed to those who do not." (CU 8.6.4)

"The self ... that is free from evils, free from old age and death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst; the self whose desires and intentions are real—... When someone discovers that self and perceives it, he obtains all the worlds, and all his desires are fulfilled." (CU 8.8.4)

Another teaching says that to become brahman, become immortal, one has to worship the self that lies deep within his heart, this self is brahman.

"This self ... of mine that lies deep within my heart... smaller even than a millet grain or a millet kernel; but ..., larger even than all these worlds put together. (CU 3.14.2)

"It is brahman. On departing from here after death, I will become that." (CU 3.14.4)

"Now, the people who know this... from the moon into lightning. Then a person who is not human—he leads them to brahman. "The people here in villages, on the other hand, (those who don't know)... they pass.... into the moon. ... They remain there as long as there is a residue, and then they return by the same path they went—first to space, and from space to the wind..." (and so on, eventually into food) "When someone eats that food and deposits the semen, from him one comes into being again." (CU 5.10.1-2)

So we can become one with brahman and reach immortality after death, but we also read that those who become immortal through their knowledge of their true selves are 'being led to brahman'. There are *selves* that are taken by the hand. We could interpret this as that becoming brahman is like joining a club. Once you have passed the test, you 'become brahman' and from that moment on, you are no longer connected to the physical world. While the simple people, who do not 'know' dwell in a lower kind of reality and their faith is to be reborn.

The idea of there being selves that are not dissolved into brahman after death can also be found in BU 3.8 in which is said that what remains after death:

"... is this person—..., the one that is the inner light within the heart. He travels across both worlds, being common to both. ... When at birth this person takes on a body, he becomes united with bad things, and when at death he leaves it behind, he gets rid of those bad things. "Now, this person has just two places—this world and the other world. And there is a third, the place of dream where the two meet. Standing there in the place where the two meet, he sees both those places—this world and the other world.

After death, according to this text, there is still a person around. This person can take on a body, it also perceives because it sees both places. In this text there does seem to be awareness and individuality after physical death. Or is there only 'a person' after death in a lower realm where the people go who are going to be reborn? And is non-individuality and non-awareness reserved for those who become immortal?

If there is some substantial self that survives death and that can become immortal or is reborn, that would solve the problem of *who* has become immortal, or *who* is reborn. However, we then run into the problem of how a self can keep its individuality and be *in* brahman at the same time?

Different levels of self

In combination with the idea that knowledge of our true selves is to be found within ourselves, is the idea that there are different 'levels' or 'parts' of selves, only one of them being our true self. Wxamples of this are Prajapati's teaching of Indra (CU 8.7.2-8.12) and the 'Five sheaths of self' in the Taittiriya Upanishad.

In Indra's search of the self, Prajapati leads him through some false doctrines of the self before Indra can discover what the real self is. To have true knowledge of the ultimate reality of the self or of the whole, Indra first needs to understand and reject inferior accounts of self. This process is not something that can be taught or learned in a few minutes, it takes Indra over a hundred years. He needs to fully understand why these other doctrines of self are false, he needs to 'see' it clearly and distinctly as Descartes would say. Every time when Indra *understands* that he must reject a doctrine he is making progress, he reaches a more profound level of understanding, coming a bit closer to the true self in every step. There is no shortcut to this knowledge. It is like looking through ever stronger microscopes; if you would start with the strongest one which zooms in on the building blocks of matter, you would have no clue what you are looking at. To fully grasp what you are seeing in this ultimate microscope, you'd need to go through different stages of zoom, fully understanding what is it that you see at every stage before you can move on to the next stage.

This idea of levels of the self is also expressed in the Taittiriya Upanishad (TU 2.1-5) where they talk about the five sheaths of the self.

Different from and lying within this man formed from the essence of food is the self ... consisting of lifebreath, the self consisting of lifebreath assumes a manlike appearance.

And three more sheaths, breath, mind and the intellect before we get to:

Different from and lying within this self consisting of perception is the self ... consisting of bliss,.... and the bottom on which it rests is the brahman.

A man who knows brahman obtains the highest there is.

In the Mandukya Upanishad (MA 7) we read:

... for this brahman is the Whole. Brahman is this self; that ... is this self ... consisting of four quarters.

Of the quarters the fourth is the part that contains the real self the one that should be perceived.

A beautiful metaphor is presented in the verse about two birds in the Mundaka Upanishad (MU 3.1.1-5), in which we could read the presence of different selves residing within one man, a temporal, empirical self and an eternal transcendental self:

*Two birds, companions and friends,
nestle on the very 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*

*by her who is not the Lord;
But when he sees the other,
the contented Lord—and his majesty—
his grief disappears.*

*Then, shaking off the good and the bad,
the wise man becomes spotless,
and attains the highest identity.*

He is brahman!

It lies within the body, brilliant and full of light

What do these accounts of different selves, or different levels of selves tell us about the self that survives death and which can become immortal or be reborn? We could interpret these texts as that there are lower, temporal, empirical selves that are caught up in the (causal) cycle of rebirth, while the eternal self is lying “*within the body, brilliant and full of light*” as a passive witness waiting to be freed. This freedom, however, can only be won with the help of the temporal selves through conscious effort in gaining knowledge about the eternal selves within them. The tension then between the human being and the eternal self is not dissolved.

Conclusion

The main question that keeps popping up in my mind after reading the teachings in the Upanishads is the question, who am I? Because after all, it is the empirical, temporal me who is addressed and who is asked to look within myself for the immortal eternal self. How should I find comfort in the thought of immortality if I will not be there, and likewise how should I find distress of being reborn in the future if I will not be aware that it is me? Perhaps we could say that I haven’t succeeded in engaging enough in the Upanishadic episteme, that might be the case, but I still can’t see how the tension between the accounts of the self as human being, the self that is reborn in another body, the self that escapes the cycle of rebirth and the self which is identified with brahman can be dissolved without a giant leap of faith. A leap of faith I am not inclined to take.

This is not to say that I don’t think that the Upanishads are a collection of brilliant philosophical texts. But I do think that the ideas of immortality and rebirth, universally accepted in the Upanishads make it difficult to come to terms with the idea of the identification of the self with brahman, with the episteme. Accepting these principles, I believe, take away a lot of the philosophical force of the texts about the nature of reality and of human selves within reality.

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