

Today's Lecture

- Concluding the *Upanishads*
- Beginning the *Gita*

Upanishads – Atman

- Where we left off:
- For Upanishadic philosophers, this perspective on the self and the Self yields two further consequences worth noting at this time (see *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* IV: 4: 5-7).
- (1) Release or liberation from *samsara* is achieved by transcending your-self, by transcending the ‘I’ or ‘me’ of personal identity.
- (2) The good life, or the morally fulfilling life, is to be had by transcending one’s egocentrism. By moving beyond an ‘I’ orientation, or the possessive ‘mine’, by acquiring a transcendent perspective of Reality, one moves beyond those motives of action that lead to wrong doing.
- By cultivating (2) you walk the Path to (1). *Arguably*, and this is a stronger claim, *(1) requires (2)*.

Upanishads – Atman

- *Atman* cannot, according to the Upanishadic philosophers, be grasped as an object of knowledge (at least when knowledge is understood as either (i) propositional (or linguistic) in nature, or (ii) as arising from the senses, memory or reason).
- The *Kena Upanishad* describes *Atman* as both “other than the known and other than the unknown” (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.22). Other than known because it is not an object of knowledge in the way a table or chair is such an object, other than unknown because we can know, or can become aware of, the Self (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.22-23).

Upanishads – Atman

- Why can't *Atman* be an object of knowledge?
- Start from the Upanishadic premise that (1) *Atman* is other than our bodies, or other than our states of wakened consciousness, dream consciousness, or deep sleep consciousness.
- (2) Arguably, such states exhaust the domains of what can be properly regarded as objects of knowledge. That is, think of possible objects of knowledge. Arguably, they are objects of knowledge through our 'mundane' sources of knowledge (e.g. sense perception, reason, memory, and the like), sources of knowledge that require a to-be-specified level of subjective awareness.

Upanishads – Atman

- (3) If *Atman* is beyond or behind subjective awareness, and thus our mundane sources of knowledge, then *Atman* cannot be known through our mundane sources of knowledge.
- (4) So, *Atman* cannot be properly regarded as an object of knowledge (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.24).

Upanishads – Atman

- Wherein lies knowledge of *Atman*?
- Upanishadic philosophers argue that we must have knowledge of *Atman* directly, or through direct perception or awareness.
- As we now all know at this point, such a direct perception or awareness of *Atman* points to the central role of meditation as the means for coming to a direct knowledge of *Atman*.
- ‘*Turiya*’ refers to the meditative state in which ‘you’ directly perceive *Atman*, according to Upanishadic philosophy. Or, more accurately, *turiya* is the state in which *Atman* directly perceives Itself (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.24).

Upanishads – Atman IS Brahman

- As you also now know, the great discovery claimed by the Upanishadic philosophers is that *Atman* and *Brahman* are identical (i.e. that *Atman is Brahman*) (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.24).
- This is not a claim that is merely made to circumvent the problem attached to the aforementioned way of negativity regarding Nirguna Brahman.
- For the Upanishadic philosophers, ‘knowledge’ of this identity arises, fundamentally, out of the previously mentioned meditative experience of *turiya* (see also **AP4**, p.24).

Upanishads – Atman IS Brahman

- While in this state *there is only Atman*. That is to say, while in this state there is no duality *whatsoever*...no you versus me, no chair versus human, and *no inner versus outer reality* (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.24; *Course Pack*, p.1).
- *IF* there is no distinction between inner and outer reality *while in turiya, THEN, while in turiya*, there is also no distinction between that which ultimately underlies inner and outer reality. *IF* there is no distinction between that which ultimately underlies inner and outer reality *while in turiya, THEN, while in turiya*, there is no distinction between *Atman* and *Brahman*. *IF* there is no distinction between *Atman* and *Brahman* while in *turiya, THEN, while in turiya, Atman* and *Brahman must be* the same, or identical.

Upanishads – Atman IS Brahman

There is another way to think about it.

(1) The Self is that which lies behind, or beyond, my dream states or my non-conscious states.

(2) The Self also lies behind your dream states or non-conscious states.

(3) But you are a part of the outer world, from my point of view.

(4) I am a part of the outer world, from your point of view.

(5) The fundamental essence or reality which underlies you, as outside of me, is *Brahman*.

(6) Likewise the fundamental essence which underlies me, as outside of you, is *Brahman*.

Upanishads – Atman IS Brahman

(7) Since that which fundamentally underlies me, from my perspective, and that which fundamentally underlies you, from your perspective, is also *Atman*, *Brahman* **must be** *Atman*.

Koller has something like this argument in mind when he writes,

“The exciting discovery they [i.e. the seers of the Upanishads] now made was that *Atman* was none other than *Brahman*. Only one ultimate reality existed, although it appeared to be two because it could be approached either by looking for the ground of things, or by looking for the ground of self” (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.24).

Upanishads – Atman IS Brahman

This, then, leads to the dialogue between father and son in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (*Course Pack*, pp.5-6).

On pages 5 through 6 of your *Course Pack* the father teaches the son that the fundamental ground of outer reality *is* the fundamental ground of inner reality, **AND**, consequently, that, fundamentally, ‘You are that’ - ‘*Tat tvam asi*’.

In other words, because *Atman* and *Brahman* are identical, your fundamental or ultimate essence can be appropriately referred to as either *Brahman* or *Atman*. Because *Brahman* ultimately underlies all that you see around you, so does your fundamental or ultimate essence. Thus, ***You are That*** (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.25).

Upanishads – Atman IS Brahman

- There are at least two consequences of the identity of *Atman* and *Brahman*.
- (1) IF *Atman* can be known (i.e. if you can come to know *Atman*) AND *Atman* is *Brahman*, THEN to know *Atman* just is to know *Brahman* (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.24-25).
- Thus, the epistemological impasse of the way of negativity can be overcome.
- (2) *Brahman* is All. IF to know *Atman* just is to know *Brahman*, THEN to know *Atman* is to know All (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.25).
- This belief (in (2)) that there is omniscience to be had, is shared with Buddhists and Jains (though for different reasons).

The Bhagavad Gita

- A word of caution about going through the *Gita* with me. Just as there are theologians who spend their career studying the Judeo-Christian scriptures there are scholars who spend their lives studying the *Gita* (and related Hindu scriptures). I am neither.
- This text is best approached personally. It is a form of wisdom literature. Thus it offers a way of understanding Reality with an eye to providing a Way of approaching experience and life generally. Arguably, it's value lies in its ability to guide you in living the good life. Whether it succeeds is, in part, an empirical question, and so this question can only be properly answered through experience.
- What I propose to do is point out certain details of the text and leave the overall evaluation of the text to you.

The Bhagavad Gita

- There are a number of things to quickly note about the *Gita* before jumping into a discussion of the text.
- (1) This is only a portion of a greater epic known as the *Mahabharata* (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.44).
- (2) This Epic, and the *Gita*, are both traditionally regarded as scripture, though of a lesser authority than the *Vedas*. In other words, the *Gita* is a part of *smriti* (literally ‘that which is remembered’, or tradition) rather than *shruti* (literally, ‘that which is heard’).
- (3) The *Gita* is highly regarded by many contemporary Hindus. *Some* even ascribe as much authority to the *Gita* as they do the *Vedas*.

The Bhagavad Gita

- (4) The *Gita* was probably written over a lengthy period of time (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.44). It has, then, more than one author, and seems to divide into at least two broad sections: Chapters 1 through 12, and Chapters 13 through 18 (see the notes for pages 15-16 on page 200 of your *Bhagavad Gita*). We will be studying Chapters 1 through 12 together.

The Bhagavad Gita

- (5) The *Gita* is significant in the development of Hinduism for three reasons:
- (i) It encapsulates much Upanishadic philosophical, spiritual and moral teaching (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.44);
- (ii) as a repository of Vedic teaching it was ‘available’ to those outside of the twice-born *varnas*, or classes (unlike the *Vedas* themselves); (i.e. the *Gita* brought Vedic teaching to ‘the masses’ thus circumventing the relevant restrictions imposed by the *varnadharma*);

The Bhagavad Gita

- (iii) it is regarded by many scholars to be a crucial unifying text in the history of Hinduism, bringing together Vedic ritualism, Upanishadic teaching, and incorporating various elements from contemporary devotional traditions.
- This unifying character of the *Gita* means that there are theological or philosophical elements or themes from the aforementioned sources in tension with each other within the text.