
Plato and Vedanta

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Abstract

The relationship between Plato's conception of the existence of a soul as compared to the Vedantic view of a soul will be analysed. Vedanta philosophy holds in agreement with Plato that there is a magazine of knowledge and power within us already. By amalgamating the thinking of Plato and Vedic philosophy I will attempt to show how philosophical thinking is universal. This universality allows one to critically appraise knowledge from multiple perspectives providing a lever for a new understanding of oneself and thereby challenging one to broaden his/her own perspective, enabling one to see, whether one likes it or not, what s/he has become, and can through self-analysis become. My purpose in this paper is to develop a capacity to see the world multi-dimensionally, integrating, enlarging, and expanding our artificially restricted horizons. A combination of methods and a receptive attitude toward knowledge has widespread implications for the interpretation of the lives we live. It is my purpose to demonstrate the validity and necessity of an examination of multi-cultural dimensions of reality, in this instance the Greek and Hindu perspectives and teachings. The ability to make moral distinctions can be linked to an evolutionary progression of one's soul's journey. The implicit, intrinsic nature of consciousness to the mind – body duality will be analysed. I will propose that the elevation of one's consciousness in the search for a perfect state of being is the common thread in both Plato and Vedanta.

Introduction

Philosophy proper as instituted by Socrates – the love of wisdom rather than merely of knowledge and argumentation¹ – is virtually absent in certain contemporary contexts, but it does exist peripherally where thinkers have moved beyond the technical, logical, rational mentality to a truly holistic approach. This results in one actually taking the consequences of what one teaches and applying the lessons of unity and wholeness in practice to one's daily life. The dichotomy here lies in the diametric approaches science and

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spirituality adopt to certain key issues in regards to their methods or standards of truth.

Questions such as, "Does the evidence and testimony sufficiently prove the accused was in fact responsible for the murder?" are questions of value which are ethical in nature and can only be answered by an evaluation of the facts, which can be established through scientific empiricism. But the question "Ought we to return a verdict of guilty?" is really not a scientific or legal question... it is a moral one that no number of facts can solve.

In comparing the teachings of the philosophies of Plato and the Vedas the idea of an incorporeal, formative cause which guides our moral assumptions and enables us to have self knowledge which is sustainable and consistent will be expounded. My argument is that we essentially are consciousness and are "ensouled" beings although we have bodies and use matter to express our life work. My objective is to show we are not merely extremely intricate organisms, but that the highest expressions and aspirations of humankind are spiritual, not material or social. It is part of my purpose here to demonstrate the validity and necessity of such a turnaround in assumptions and to trace something of what it implies for the health of a more understanding and holistically intelligible kind of consciousness. It is my view that consciousness needs no physical substructure to exist.

Before I proceed to a discussion of the comparisons, I believe, it is imperative to contextualize the two schools of thought.

Plato's conception of the existence of a soul

Although we have been accustomed to study things in apparent isolation, we must shift to the one-world perspective and see Plato as a one world philosopher. If we see Plato in the perspective of the total development of world history up to his time, he takes a position as if at a fulcrum in the history of ideas. Plato lived in 5th century Greece. He was roughly the contemporary of the Buddha, Mahavira and Confucius. Human culture was being developed and the basic ideas that have shaped human destiny ever since were being formulated. It is my view that Plato's thinking has influenced religious and social thinking in every part of the globe. " He has always been regarded as one of the greatest (Western) philosophers, by some as the greatest of them all".² Perhaps Plato almost bridges Being and Becoming, but there remains according to him, (logismos nothos) "bastard reasoning" which is the opposite of true rationality even though it appears to be rational. It is the rationalizing we do after the wrong has been done in order to try to make it right when it really is not. There is an unaccountable factor of brute discord inherent in the universe which always obstructs perfection and reason in every human and cosmic enterprise. Rationality and irrationality are the human

manifestations of this basic imperfection of the universe. For humankind it is this bastard reasoning which makes Becoming necessary as an effort to overcome imperfection and to return to the perfection of Being or Perfect Idea. For Plato, faith (*pistis*) as the response to *Eros* (love) fulfils this function. Although this faith cannot eliminate or harmonise imperfection, it does lead to striving and thus to expansion. When the Demiurge created the world he had only imperfect matter with which to make the “copies”. This idea of an inherent deficiency in matter is the basis of the early Upanishadic concept of “*maya*”: thus Plato’s Becoming is very much like this *maya* (illusion, the cause of material creation)³. Man, for Plato remains a child in spite of his capacity for reason. Plato’s greatest achievement was the capacity to think multi-dimensionally and in his view, knowledge had no practical use, as it existed for the abstract good of the soul. To Plato philosophy is not a doctrine or even a “method” in the modern sense of the word, but a mode of life, a perspective from which to view the world, or at least the search for such a perspective. After his “enlightenment”, Plato’s philosopher, like the *jivan mukta* (liberated while still in the body by means of discrimination) in the Vedas, dutifully returns to deal with, or even to rule in, the “second best”, the world. Besides his keen interest in the problem of immortality, Plato treated the things concerned with human destiny almost as sacred mysteries not to be approached without purification, preferably the purgation by Socratic dialectic.

The Idea of Perfection forever inspires us or even entraps us, as well as the universe, in a sort of inevitable entelechy. *Eros* (love) is to be worshipped devoutly as the Inspirer-toward-the-Good. For Plato, there is no question as important as the question of *eros* because it is the basic force of not only human life, but all living beings. Plato does claim that the journey of *theoria* is both fueled and sustained by *eros*⁴. The Greek concept of piety was expressed by two words, *eusebes*, which means being fearful of and reverential toward the gods, and *hosios*, which means being hallowed or sanctioned by divine prescriptions and prohibitions. Even the justice and injustice of one human being to another are matters of piety, if they concern divine prescriptions and prohibitions⁵. The aspect of the sacred and the belief in a divine existence were also an intrinsic part of the Vedas. The similarity in regard to Plato’s influence over Greek society and thought is exemplified in the Vedas and its influence on Hindu adherence and belief in the Vedic texts.

What are the Vedas

The sanskrit translation literally means knowledge, sacred teaching. Taken collectively it is the oldest text of Indian literature, to which orthodox Hindus

ascribe superhuman origins and divine authority. This vast complex of scriptures, in length constituting six times the bulk of the Bible, is divided into four parts:

1. The Rigveda – the Veda of poetry
2. The Samaveda – the Veda of songs
3. The Yajurveda - the Veda of sacrificial texts
4. The Atharvaveda – the Veda of Atharvan, a priest of the mystical fire ceremony.

Orthodox Hindus regard the Vedas as their highest written authority. Any subsequent scripture, if they were to regard it as valid, must be in agreement with them: it may expand them, it may develop them, and still be recognized, but it must not contradict them. The Vedas, are to a Hindu as nearly as any human document can be, the expression of divine truth. In the words of Dr. S Radhakrishnan, "The appeal to the Vedas does not involve any reference to an extra- philosophical standard. What is dogma to the ordinary man is experience to the pure in heart".⁶

The object of a deep study of Vedanta philosophy is to give the right nourishing food to the body, mind and soul.

Plato and Vedanta view of Reality

The beginning of philosophy is the insight that appearance and reality are not the same. Because the evidence for the origins of philosophy is so limited, though any number of elaborate constructions have been based on it, the historian of early Greek philosophy may be cautious today in his employment of myth to explain the beginnings of philosophy, but he is likely to reject a causal role for myth with the same confidence as did John Burnet at the turn of the century.⁷

The question of the nature of the state of reality, whether there exists something permanent, behind this ever-changing flux is not unfamiliar to both the Vedas and Plato. Plato points out the weakness in assuming flux and change to be ultimate. If they were, knowledge would be impossible. His impatience with the later Heracleiteans – "All things whatsoever are in change" is expressed in the *Theaetetus* where he has Theodorus go so far as to call the followers of the doctrine maniacs since they cannot even stand "still to attend to an argument or a question". (*Theaetetus*, 179c-183c)⁸. The Vedas, like Plato, sought to find the state beyond flux. The term symbolizing this aspect of flux in the Upanisads (a portion of the Vedas) is *turiya*, or transcendental consciousness.

According to the Vedas circumstances of our lives, our pains and our pleasures, are all the result of our past actions in this present existence, and in countless previous existences, from time immemorable. The Vedic term for

this is *karma*. The Vedanta doctrine of *karma* is a doctrine of absolute, automatic justice. One should remember that Plato also believed in the Vedic principle of *karma* because he did not think that offering to God or Gods could do any good to man.

According to Vedanta teachings *maya* is quite pitiless. We get exactly what we earn, no more, no less. If we cry out against some apparent injustice, it is only because the act that brought it upon us is buried deep in the past, out of reach of our memory. Once we become conscious, even dimly of the Atman, the Reality within us, the world shows itself in a very different aspect. It is no longer a court of justice but a kind of gymnasium. Good and evil, pain and pleasure, still exist but they seem more like the ropes and vaulting horses and parallel bars which can be used to make our bodies strong. *Maya* is no longer an endlessly revolving wheel of pain and pleasure but a ladder which can be climbed to consciousness of your spiritual freedom.

In Vedantic philosophy behind the objects of this phenomenal world lies a changeless, permanent reality, the supreme *Brahman* (the Supreme Being); and behind the fleeting senses and mind of an individual human being is the Self, also a changeless, permanent reality; and the supreme *Brahman* and this Self are one. Every individual houses within her/himself the Eternal Spirit, the immutable, timeless self-existence; and though this Eternal Spirit dwells within all, and all beings exist in *Brahman*, *Brahman* is not tainted or affected by the thoughts and actions, good or evil, of individual persons. Knowledge of the immutable, eternal, timeless, self-existence is called, *Brahma-nirvana*. It is not to be confused with intellectual concepts, nor with a method of thinking. It is a direct, immediate experience, in which the spiritualised consciousness sees God more directly, more intimately, than the physical consciousness see the objective world. This view of reality can be compared to Plato's distinction between knowledge and opinion in the Republic⁹.

Human beings according to Vedantic teachings are trying to annihilate time and space, the dimensions of the ego-idea, and thus uncover the Reality which is nearer and more instant than the ego, the body, or the mind¹⁰. A person is trying to be aware of what he already and always is, and this awareness is not an aspect of consciousness, but consciousness itself. The illumined seer does not merely know *Brahman*, s/he is *Brahman*, s/he is Existence, s/he is Knowledge. *Brahman*, Knowledge and Freedom are not things to be found anew.

All the earliest Hindu scriptures and all the subsequent systems of philosophy not only express their conception of spiritual truth but also offer practical methods for realizing the Divine consciousness. These methods, however, receive but casual mention in the Vedas, the Upanisads, and other early works, and whatever references there are to them deal with the specific

and detailed processes of Self-realisation handed down orally generation after generation from teacher to disciple. The same processes have been followed even to the present day. All aspirants after spiritual awakening must practice them if they would want to acquire personal experience of the truth they are seeking.

In the Upanisads, the word *Om* was held sacred by sages and seers, being regarded as a symbol of Brahman. From Vedic times until the present day it has been understood in this manner, and it has been employed as an aid in meditation by all aspirants after Brahman. It is accepted both as one with *Brahman*, and as the medium, the Logos connecting man and *Brahman*. It is *Brahman*, and by its aid man can realize *Brahman*. The entire history of the syllable is in the revelations of the Vedas and this history in the hands of the later philosophers developed into what became known as *sphota-vada*, or philosophy of the Word. The similar doctrine of the Logos can be seen in the Greek metaphysicians. The Greeks first conceived of the Logos as a bridge over the gulf that separates man and God, the known and the unknown. The Logos was identified with one or another of the physical elements, according as one or another was thought to be the ultimate substance of the universe. Heraclitus, who lived in the sixth century BC, was the first who tried to break away from a purely physical conception of creation, substituting for the material first cause of his predecessors a principle which he called intelligence. This principle of intelligence was the Logos. The advance Heraclitus made, however, was rendered somewhat equivocal by his identification of the Logos with the physical element fire.

In the hands of Plato the theory of Logos underwent a complete transformation. He regarded the Logos as the cosmic purpose, the highest idea, the supreme Good, under which all lesser ideas, that is, eternal archetypes of things, relations, qualities and values, are subsumed. According to him, these ideas are arranged in a logical order, and are governed by the Logos: thus the universe is a unity in diversity, a rational, organic whole.

The philosopher depicted in the Analogy of the Cave is an idealized figure who makes a journey that no human being could ever accomplish.¹¹ In the Analogy of the Cave, Plato illustrates how the philosopher looks away from the terrestrial world and directs his "eyes" to the region of true reality. For a time he is blinded by the light of the sun that shines there. But his eyes slowly adjust, and eventually he is able to gaze upon the beings in this metaphysical realm, including the Being that illuminates this region, the sun-like Form of the Good. The philosopher makes his way towards the direct contemplation of the Form of the Good, a vision that renders him a perfected soul akin to the Gods. The philosopher moves beyond the human realm and this adjustment and realignment of his "vision" with time enables him to transform his soul and his perspective of reality.¹²

Plato and Vedantic analysis of ethical conduct

The analysis and discussion of ethics played a significant role in the Vedas. Ethics in the language of the Vedas is the formulation of the science of conduct in relation to society as humankind faces multifarious activities as social beings. Hindu ethics as explicated in the Vedas does not only concern itself with outer human activity, but extends to the inner life as well. Every teaching is conditioned by the phrase “in thought, word and deed”. Ways of achieving right conduct are explicitly revealed – ways, which if followed, will enable one instinctively to live the ethical life. Emphasis is laid upon ultimately transforming the whole being and rising above the injunctions of moral codes. The wise man is not troubled, we read in the Upanisads, by thoughts like these: “Have I done right?” “Have I done wrong?”¹³

Vedanta is not a philosophy of escapism, nor does it look down on life as a seat of sin. The word detachment (*Vairagya*) in Vedantic teaching is often misunderstood. The world is a school where the soul is to be trained to mount higher and higher, the goal being the realization of God as the universal consciousness within. What is condemned in the world is the assumption that there is nothing above or beyond it. It is a mistake to think that wealth, sex-relationship, power and name have any real value. The duty of human beings is to know the nature of the Self and to help their fellow-beings. This end is achieved not by hatred of the world but by withdrawal from it together with absorption in benevolence, universal love and knowledge of the Self. In the words of Shankara, “We are all pilgrims to the temple of eternal light which is within the soul”. According to the teaching of the Vedas as long as one is devoted to material objects and one’s own narrow interests, people cannot avoid war, revolution and mass destruction. *Vairagya* (detachment) is needed today. It is of value not as an end in itself but as a preparatory step to the achievement of truth. If this great principle is adopted in daily life hatred will give way to love.

This can be compared to Plato’s discussion of distance and detachment in the *theoria*. As Plato indicates, in the dialogues of *Theoria*, the detached activity of contemplation transforms the philosopher, rendering him wise and truly free, this in turn, enables him to play the role of a virtuous and impartial “outsider” in his own city. For Plato this detachment is a necessary precondition for philosophical contemplation as well as for virtuous action in the world.

Plato describes the education of the theoretical Philosopher as the “turning” of the eye of the soul away from the world of becoming and towards that of being, from darkness to light; this turning around of the soul effectively turns it away from the human world and redirects it to objects in the realm of true being. In the activity of seeking and “seeing” the Forms,

the philosophic soul turns its back on “a day that is like night” and looks towards “the true light of day” (521c)¹⁴.

Plato uses the metaphor of the soul’s capacity for “vision” or sight again and again. By using the phenomenon of vision as an analogue for the apprehension of the Forms, Plato clearly conceptualizes the attainment of knowledge as “seeing” of Being.

From reading Plato one can come to the conclusion that he preferred oral or “living” discourse to the disembodied voice of the written text and that for Plato, philosophic wisdom must be enacted by a living soul in a human body.

Like the prisoners in Plato’s famous cave who, having never been outside, deny the possibility of anything so absurd as daylight or the sun, the stricter adherents of empirical materialism are those who deny the existence of either non-physical or spiritual phenomena per se.

Moral enhancement of consciousness

The realities of contemporary society create a strain on the individual to foster a balance between the awareness and perception of one’s individual being or individuality and the social relations within changing cultural contexts. This becomes a moral challenge since awareness of one’s identity strains social relations if there is a perceived conflict between values and interests between yourself and your fellow beings. One should evaluate one’s moral conceptions and motivations not only in relation to oneself, but also how they relate to others and to one’s society generally in order to justify one’s decision both to oneself and to others.

In his discussion of the Doctrine of Forms, Plato distinguishes between eternal and temporal being, while in his discussion of motion in the universe being generated by souls, for example, with particular reference to Laws X, the motion of *nous* is a “revolution” which actually resembles circular motion. This aspect of motion has strong similarity with the description of Lord Indra in the Rigveda. I would like to quote a verse from the Rigveda depicting Indra as the soul of the World: “He (Indra) of whom all this world is but the copy who shakes things moveless, He, O men, is Indra.” (Rg. II, XII - 9)¹⁵

The likeness of Plato’s views of souls generating motion in the world and the role of Lord Indra is comparable to the assertion in *Timaeus* that the soul is self-moving motion, and that it is the “primary” causal principle in the created universe.

The importance of this research is that it is an attempt to show how consciousness unites the mind and body. Our consciousness is not a sense – empirical phenomenon but is an inner dimension of being. It is part of a greater reality which is available to our intuition as consciousness. It is an

inner source which can be equated to a consistently expansive and present reservoir of a collective awareness. This state of being is accessed and one becomes conscious of its potential through an evolutionary progression of one's soul's journey. This itself lends much credence to the Platonic assertion that a world of unchanging forms or archetypes somehow 'exists' independently of individual minds. The level of development of one's consciousness enables one to endeavour to make moral distinctions which in my estimation would be aligned to virtuous actions and intentions.

The Vedantic *akasaor* (all pervasive) which is the subtlest mind force that penetrates everything and contains a complete record of everything has been described as the non-corporeal realm and has been part of Vedic literature since time immemorable. It is my view that consciousness is the interconnecting aspect or glue between the mind and body. It is not generated by any mental or physical inception but is a kind of genetic DNA which our minds have evolved to or with which we are *karmically* endowed with at birth. This exemplifies the idea of reincarnation of souls through various life cycles. These cycles I want to postulate are a very intrinsic and necessary part of the evolutionary trajectory of our consciousness. This view is also very similar to Plato's theory of *anamnesis* (recollection) where we could aspire to the ideal of the Form (perfection) once the awareness has been attained not in one lifetime but through several.¹⁶ Plato's *Meno* lays the foundation for this enterprise in that it demonstrates that objects of knowledge are found through the process of recollection¹⁷. In the questioning of Meno's untutored slave, Socrates proves that learning is but recollection of knowledge gained by the soul before its incarnation in a body (ibid: 45). Socrates says there must be "something" which enabled the slave to come to the solutions of the questions posed to him. This "something" is a knowledge absorbed by the soul before its incarnation, which question and answer has enabled it recollect (ibid: 45). This something is what I call consciousness.

What exactly is the connection between consciousness, a complex functioning of our mind's to my assertion that it bridges the mind-body quandary. I believe because of its very phenomenal nature consciousness cannot be relegated to only the mind or thinking component. There is an intrinsic, intuitive and implicit causal connection between certain aspects of our cognitive and conceptual makeup and our bodily functions that are mediated by this connective and continuing "something" deep seated within us which as already stated I call consciousness.

Conclusion

The Vedic concepts *karma* (justice) and *turiya* (transcendental consciousness) and Plato's *anamnesis* (recollection) seem to indicate that human conduct in

terms of our virtuous and moral inclinations is dependent on a logic of values and actions which are inexplicable. I propose the moral significance of an individual's decision or action is a direct result of their level of consciousness, whether they are aware of it or not. The moral choices an individual embarks upon may appear as a random outcome or unavoidable series of accumulative events or even an impulse without reflection, however, I believe the course chartered is neither. Due to the individual's ignorance or state of *maya* there are cycles of these repeated moral vagaries until there is a significant enhancement in the level of consciousness, which results in a desire to abstain from this unwholesome and unworthy behaviour and consciously engage in morally upright deeds. This is the commencement of self-analysis. This works in close association with enhancement of one's consciousness and is a very important element in the cognition of the reality within. The intuitive, instinctive or reflective cognition of one's inner reality whether it is constituted or felt is conceived as consciousness once the individual being's soul has life. This is an eternal process and each and every person is endowed with the ability to be awakened to this dimension of self-analysis or enlightenment. This is an extremely gradual and even painstaking process because of the *maya* we are persistently shrouded by. Until the gross and carnal desires are quelled and totally negated, the evolution of one's consciousness is almost nominal. It is my belief that we are reaching and searching, in the language of Plato (by *anamnesis*) for a perfect state of being. This is attainable through our consciousness and its elevation and evolution. When this evolutionary process commences, an individual's mind and body, unity and connectedness are as sweet as nectar and regardless of any diversions (*maya*) one is confronted with, the mind and body yearns for this quiet contemplative quality of being – a silence amidst the chaos of life.

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