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## Description of Module

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## Vedānta, Śaṅkara and Moral Irrealism

### 1. Introduction

This and the following lessons cover the topic of Vedānta and ethics. Vedānta has two meanings.

The first is the literal sense – “End of Vedas” – and refers to the Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads—the latter part of the Vedas. The Vedas are the literature of the ancient Indo European people of South Asia. The Vedas themselves seem to have taken over a thousand years to form.

The second sense of “Vedanta” is a scholastic one, and refers to a philosophical orientation that attempts to explain the cryptic *Vedānta Sūtra (Brahma Sūtra)* of Bādarāyaṇa. There are many commentaries on this text. The largest number of commentaries, but perhaps the least philosophically famous, are those of the Bhedābheda (difference and non-difference) school. There are three approaches that have taken the spotlight: Śaṅkara’s Advaita (Monistic) Vedānta, Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified Monistic) Vedānta and Madhva’s Dvaita (Pluralist) Vedanta.

In this module we shall examine the ethical theory of Deontology found in the Upaniṣads. Having explored the implications of this model for moral philosophy, we can reflect upon the three commentarial approaches. In this lesson, we will examine Śaṅkara’s Advaita approach and in the next one we shall examine Madhva’s and Rāmānuja’s approaches.

#### 1.1 Moral Theory Primer

We reviewed the distinction between differing moral theories earlier in this course. As a reminder, let us refresh our memory:

- *Consequentialism*: the good (end) justifies the right (means).
- *Virtue Theory*: a good—virtue or strength—produces right action.

Both theories are remarkably alike, so much so they are often grouped together as *teleological*. Then there are two more possibilities:

- *Deontology*: the *right* is prior to the *good* as a matter of justifying choices.
- *Bhakti (Yoga) Theory*: the *right* causes the *good*.

These two theories are likewise akin. They are as though mirrors of the previous pair, but inverted. Certainly this is true in the case of Bhakti, which reverses the causal direction between the good and the right of Virtue Ethics. What Deontology and Bhakti have in common is a procedural account of ethics. We may hence group them together as *procedural*. They differ from the teleological accounts. The difference between Deontology and Bhakti, in turn, has to do with the difference between the relationship of the good and the right. On Deontology’s account, the good is not the justification of the right. Deontologists can define duties in terms of good outcomes: nonviolence might be a duty because its implementation results in less harm over all. If this is merely a definition of nonviolence as one’s duty then a Deontologist can embrace nonviolence as duty. They rather disagree that the reason to conform to this duty is that it will result in a specific outcome: it might not. Being nonviolent on a certain occasion, for instance, might not reduce the amount of net violence in a context. For the Deontologist, this is not relevant. Bhakti (Yoga) in contrast defines right action as what causes the good. This relationship of causality is made possible if the good is merely the transformation brought about by right action. This is yoga. But it is also bhakti in so far as the outcome is the realization of the regulative ideal, which defines

procedure. For instance, if in practicing music, I conform to the ideal of music (I am devoted to music) I thereby begin to produce music. Here the good just is the realization of the practice understood in relationship to the ideal. This is Bhakti (Yoga). On this account, it makes little sense to claim that the right action will not produce a good outcome: it will if you stick to it.

## 2. Early Vedic Ethics

The Vedas are a body of literature of the ancient South Asian branch of the Indo-European peoples. The corpus itself was written over a long stretch of time: from 1500 BCE to 500 BCE. It has conventionally been divided into four Vedas (*R̥g*, *Yajur*, *Sāman* and *Arthavan*) and each Veda is often divided into four sections: Formulas (Mantras), Ritual Manuals (*Brāhmaṇas*), Forest Books (*Āraṇyaka*) and Dialogues (Upaniṣads) (Müller 2014). “Veda”, when not employed as a term for the whole, denotes the first three, to the exclusion of the Dialogues. The four Vedas themselves overlap, though there are some differences in theme. The mantra portions of the *R̥g*, *Yajur* and *Sāman* consist of hymns to and accounts of the various Nature deities, many of which are to be employed in sacrifices. The *Arthavan*, meanwhile, is a collection of spells and cures. Whereas the *Brāhmaṇas* specify the practical aim and procedures of the sacrifice, the *Āraṇyakas* treat the sacrifice as a model for something else – often, self-reflection. The school of thought founded on these earlier portions is known as *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* (literally, “the interpretation of the former”).

The Dialogues (Upaniṣads) crystallize a shift in focus (Santucci 1976). Where the previous portions of the Vedas focussed on the various gods and building fortuitous relations with them, the dialogues shift to the relationship between the self (*ātmanā*) and development or growth (Brahman) (Monier-Williams 1995, 737–8). The Upaniṣads present development as the primary divinity, and often identify it with the self. The school of thought based on the Upaniṣads is known as Vedānta (lit., “the end of the Vedas”).

The focus of the active or practical part of the Vedas consists in rituals aimed at appeasing deities. Many of the deities of the Vedas are like the deities of other early Indo-European cultures. They are objects or forces of nature: planets, the elements, stars. The hymns often praise one deity, or group of deities, as supreme. A theme in these hymns is the motivation to gain wealth, utility or beneficial outcomes. A central method of gaining such wealth, utility or benefit was thought to be the sacrifice.

Ethically, the early Vedas present us with a Consequentialist style ethical theory, where the justification of actions (karma) is bound up with its consequences. On this score, we sacrifice to the gods to get something in return. Insofar as this sacrifice is justified, it is justified because of the outcomes. Indeed, the doctrine of karma (action) as a goal or consequence-oriented choice seems to have been developed in the context of Vedic Consequentialism (Tull 1989).

The connection between the Gods of the Vedas and Consequentialism is deliberate. The gods of the Vedas are nature gods. To appease such a God is to act in accordance with its nature. The expectation is that such sacrifice results in utility. This renders early Vedic ethics not only a form of Consequentialism, but naturalism. Naturalism is the view that ethics is about the forces or items of nature. This is the early Vedic approach.

Later in the Indian tradition, we find this approach to ethics explicitly criticised in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. According to Krishna, those who worry about the consequences of their actions are misers (*Bhagavad Gītā* 2.49). The suggestion here is that the ethics of the early Vedas, concerned with sacrifice in return for benefits, is a mistake. We should rather abandon a concern for the outcomes of actions, good or bad, and worry instead about Yoga (*Bhagavad Gītā* 2.50). It is, of course, of some note that Krishna delivers this lecture to Arjuna as his charioteer, prior to the battle of the *Mahābhārata*. This argument and

the imagery is derivable from an argument in the Upaniṣads itself, where we find the model of the chariot employed. The criticism of Consequentialism, and the promotion of the Proceduralism of Yoga is Vedic, albeit *Vedānta*.

### 3. Self as Self-Governance in the Vedas

There are many documents called Upaniṣads in the Indian tradition. For a review of these, I would recommend Brian Black's excellent review article of the Upanishads (2015). Here, we will focus conservatively on the Upaniṣads of the Vedic corpus. These include: *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, *Āitareya Upaniṣad* and the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. Here, we find central teachings of the Upaniṣadic doctrine of the *ātman* and Brahman discussed.

In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.1–16), we learn that the self is a non-material essence in all living beings. For this reason, it repeats: “you are that” (*tat tvam asi*).

Yājñavalkya in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* defines the self as the “inner controller” (*antaryāmin*) and claims that it is of the same kind in all living beings, but numerically distinct (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.7.23). Those who know the self, on this account, are peaceful (*śānta*), generous (*dānta*), patient (*uparata*), enduring (*titikṣu*) and composed (*samāhita*) (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.23).

In the *Āitareya Upaniṣad* creation narrative, the *ātman* fulfills the role of a creator god, who determines the various contingencies by its life (*Āitareya Upaniṣad* 1.3.11).

An influential teaching from the Upaniṣads that identifies *ātman* and brahman is from Śāṅḍilya (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14.4): if one understands the self as Brahman and Brahman as all, one becomes one with the world at the time of Death.

Finally, “Yājñavalkya teaches Janaka that knowledge of the self is beyond good (*kalyāṇa*) and evil (*pāpa*), that through knowledge of the self, one reaches the world of Brahman, where the good or bad actions of one's life do not follow” (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.22). In this section, I have been following the lead of Brian Black's excellent survey of Upaniṣadic doctrines. He quite rightly notes that these texts have been open to interpretation:

Although Śāṅḍilya's teaching of *ātman* and *brahman* is often considered the central doctrine of the Upaniṣads, it is important to remember that this is not the only characterization either of the self or of ultimate reality. While some teachers, such as Yājñavalkya, also equate *ātman* with *brahman* (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.5), others, such as Uddālaka Āruṇi, do not make this identification. Indeed, Uddālaka, whose famous phrase *tat tvam asi* is later taken by Śāṅkara to be a statement of the identity of *ātman* and *brahman*, never uses the term “Brahman” – neither in his instruction to his son Śvetaketu, nor on any other of his many appearances in the *Upaniṣads*. Moreover, it is often unclear, even in Śāṅḍilya's teaching, whether linking *ātman* with *brahman* refers to the complete identity of the self and ultimate reality, or if *ātman* is considered an aspect or quality of *brahman*. Such debates about how to interpret the teachings of the Upaniṣads have continued throughout the Indian philosophical tradition, and are particularly characteristic of the Vedānta darśana (Black 2015).

Black is, no doubt, correct that the latter commentators disagreed on the proper interpretation of these Upaniṣad passages. While it is true that the Upaniṣads are open to interpretation, this is true of all texts. The question for us is: what is the ethics of the Upaniṣads?

If we do not focus on the question of ethics, it seems that the various claims about Brahman and *ātmā* suggest a kind of moral irrationalism, or at least amoralism, where ultimate reality is even beyond good (*kalyāṇa*) and evil (*pāpa*).

But if we know something about moral philosophy and ethical theory, the various claims about the *ātmā* fall in line with the *Procedural* account of ethics, where a clear understanding of the self implies that the self is a self-governor, and is not motivated by desires for good and bad outcomes, but rather the self-mastery that would allow it to determine the contingencies of itself. Such a self is non-material because it is a *normative ideal*, but yet it ideally controls the material aspects of its own existence. Moreover, a self of this order understands that what is common to all living beings is an interest in development (Brahman). Every self, hence, is ideally Brahman. Brahman is the genus (development) of which each self is the species: the instances of this species are the material or contingent aspects of the self's life.

One might be concerned that this says very little about our relationship to others. However, this is actually incorrect. When we understand what it is to be a self, and that it is ideally developmental, then we have a certain generosity and patience with all selves – so long as we ourselves are developing our self. As noted in the Upaniṣads, the self who understands this of itself is one with the ideal of development (Brahman) and displays virtues such as self-restraint and generosity.

In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* from the Vedas, we find an account of the self that employs the chariot as a model. The account shows some similarities to Plato's view, though it is very different. In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, the boy Nachiketa pestered his father during a solemn sacrifice with the question "to whom will you sacrifice me?" His father (perhaps in a moment of irritation) replied, "to death". But as it was said during an official context, the boy was sacrificed. Yet, this was a boy who was facing Death ahead of his time. Death was not expecting him. So, the boy had to wait in the palace of Death (Yama) for three days. When Death returned, he offered three boons to the boy for each day the boy was kept waiting. One of the boons allowed him to return to his father and the other was an explanation of the sacrifices required to achieve the high life (heaven). The last boon was an explanation of what happens after death: does a person survive? Death attempted to dissuade the boy from gaining the answer to this question by offering him trinkets. However, the boy remained resolute. Death praised him for knowing the difference between *preya* (maximisation) and *śreya* (control). Those who prefer advancement are happy with gifts, while those who are wise want to be in charge.

According to Death, the body is like a chariot in which the self sits. The intellect (*buddhi*) is like the charioteer. The senses (*indriya*) are like horses, and the mind (*mānasa*) is the reins. The Enjoyer is the union of the self, senses, mind and intellect. The object of the senses are like the roads that the chariot travels on. People of poor understanding do not take control of their horses (the senses) with their mind (the reins). Rather, they let their senses draw them to objects of desire, leading them to ruin. According to Yama, the person with understanding reins in the senses with the mind and intellect (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* I.2). This is (explicitly called) Yoga (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.6). The self of those who practice yoga reaches the final place, Vishnu's abode. This is the place of the Great Self. There is no evil here (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* I.3).

According to the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, which does not explicitly mention Brahman in the section we have referred to, the self that understands its project as one of its own development (self-governance) and not good (*kalyāṇa*) and evil (*pāpa*) outcomes is liberated from Death. But this is an ethical argument: the

self that rejects Consequentialism and embraces what seems like Proceduralism wins. While Brahman – development – is not mentioned by name, the project of self-development is described: this is Yoga. So, on this account, the self is Brahman (Development) when it abandons Consequentialism and embraces Deontology. Such a self is a god of its own life, determining the various contingencies of body and experience. A self that embraces its own project of development (Brahman) reaches the realm of Vishnu (the God of preservation) – which is to say, such selves are preserved.

This is to understand the self prescriptively in terms of what it ought to do, and not in terms of what it contingently does. So, Death concludes:

This self is not obtained by speech, nor by intellect, nor by much revelations about sacrifices (*śruti*). He or she whom the Self chooses, gains him or herself. Deliberately choosing the self (*ātmā vi-vṛṇute*) is governing oneself (*tanum svam*) verily (*am*). One who has not first turned away from evil policies (*duścara*), who is not peaceful and subdued, or whose mind is not at rest, can never obtain the Self by insight! Such a confused one will not know where the Self went–The self for whom privilege (Brahmins [the priestly caste] and Kṣatriyas [the governing caste]) is the main course, and death the sauce. (My translation, *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* I.2.23-5).

There are alternative, poor, readings of this same argument. For instance, Max Müller, and many others, translate this passage as discussing a purely religious revelation of the self to the votary, brought about not by mere study, but by choosing the self. This gloss renders the passage evocative of Christianity or other religious traditions, where choosing a deity is the first premise. Similarly, Müller translates Death as praising the boy for distinguishing between pleasure and the good (Grimes 1996; Müller 2014; Upanishads). Pleasure is apparently what Death was trying initially to offer the boy, who preferred knowledge of the afterlife. But the prioritisation of the good over pleasure is Plato’s view. It has no foundation here, for the actual diversions that Death offers the boy are not positive subjective experiences (pleasures), but *things*: outcomes or utility that one might hope to gain from the early Vedic ethics of sacrifice. If this Platonic gloss is what the Upaniṣads recommend, this is asceticism. But, in fact, Death distinguishes between the self-control of the good driver, and diversions – outcomes, utility. In this respect, the distinction between *śreya* and *preya* is the distinction between the **Bhakti** (*śreya*), and the Consequentialist (*preya*). The Platonic reading of Vedic thought inverts Death’s lesson by identifying *śreya*, the **Bhakti** notion of self-governance, with the Consequentialist idea of ideal utility, to be favoured over the merely pleasurable.

What should we make of these observations? The metaphysics of the Upaniṣads is its Procedural ethical theory. This theory places development and the self at the front. Understanding the self as defined by its Procedural parameters vitiates worries about good and evil, which are categories of Consequentialism. If the only ethical theory one understands is Consequentialist – that is, if one is accustomed to thinking about ethical theories simply in terms of good or bad outcomes – this theory of metaphysics will appear *amoral* – an illusion brought about by ignorance of moral philosophy. To all those who believe that the earlier portion of the Vedas is the part concerned with the ethics, while the latter is pure metaphysics, think again.

The main obstacle to appreciating that the metaphysics of the Upaniṣads is its ethics is the Platonic reading of Indian thought. This is a superimposition – a confusion of the subjective convictions of scholars who believe that Indian thought has to be made clear by showing how it is like Western philosophy that informs the research model. As Śaṅkara notes, superimposing one’s own subjectivity on the object of inquiry results in *avidya* (nescience). This seems, in many respects, the common trend in the

study of the Upaniṣads. According to this superimposed ignorance, the Upaniṣadic self (*ātmā*) is the soul. Brahman is the world soul or pure Being, and the mystical identity of the self and the world-soul is the liberating knowledge that takes us away from the particulars of our life to the universals. Such a gloss renders the Upaniṣad’s teachings a form of Neo-Platonism (cf. *The Enneads*, IV.3.17). However, the doctrine of the self as soul is a Platonic (and, perhaps, Buddhist) idea.

Whereas the Platonic (and Buddhist) account of the self as soul is *descriptive*, the Upaniṣads provide a normative account of the self. The (Platonic or Buddhist) soul may be evil or good, as its psychology may be. But the self as connected with Brahman is defined by its potential for improvement. The Upaniṣad’s doctrine is not one of the soul, but of the self (*ātmā*) and Development (Brahman). The way the Upaniṣads cashes this out is in terms of a Proceduralism that is the metaphysics of the self. The self is the Proceduralism of life. If it is true that the self is the Proceduralism of life, and that embracing this is about making the identity of the self and self-development (Brahman) a fact, then it is true that “you are that” (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.1–16); Yājñavalkya is correct for defining the self as an “inner controller” (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.7.23), who can thereby bring about peaceful calm (*śānta*), generosity (*dānta*), patience (*uparata*), endurance (*titikṣu*) and composure (*samāhita*) by self-knowledge (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.23). The self is a creator of life (*Aitareya Upaniṣad* 1.3.11). When one understands the self as development, and development as all-encompassing, one is preserved as part of the world when meeting Death (as depicted in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, cf. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14.4). The self is beyond good (*kalyāṇa*) and evil (*pāpa*) as it is not defined by Consequentialist considerations (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.22).

The advantage of the **Procedural** reading of the Upaniṣad is that it is amply attested in the texts, and in the choice descriptions of the self as both the inner controller, who is also development, yet beyond good and evil. The **Procedural** in question is Yoga. The disadvantage of rejecting this reading is that one must thereby ignore parts of the texts in question and focus on the importance given to the property of governance in the principle accounts of the self. Moreover, the famous *amoralist* readings (where the Upaniṣads are depicted as recommending that we transcend ethics) display a kind of profound ignorance of moral philosophy – as though the only thing that ethics can be concerned with is good (*kalyāṇa*) and evil (*pāpa*) outcomes. Indeed, if this is all ethics is, then it would seem that the Upaniṣads have nothing significant to contribute. But this characterisation or assumption of ethics is Consequentialism, which is merely one among competing ethical theories. The **Proceduralism** of Yoga, in contrast, is the Upaniṣad’s ostensive alternative to the Consequentialism of the early Vedas concerned with ritual and the hope of beneficial outcome. As far as the Upaniṣads seem to take it, Brahman or our development, is Yoga.

### 3.1 Proceduralism: Deontology or Bhakti?

A possible objection to this reading is that while **Proceduralism** is the approach to ethics that focuses on duty (indeed, the term “Deontology” derives from the Greek “*deon*”, which stands for obligation), the Upaniṣad ethics is not concerned with duty, but with self-governance. Hence, the Upaniṣad approach to ethics cannot be Deontology. This argument errs for two reasons. First it assumes that self-governance cannot be the principled means of instantiating the idea of duty. However, self-governance is a central means of instantiating the idea of obligation for Deontologists. It certainly plays this role in the philosophy of Kant and others. The point of our investigation here is not to show that the Upaniṣads presents us with a version of Kantian Ethics – it surely does not. However, it is one of the earliest accounts of Deontology. Second, the Proceduralism of the Upaniṣads is ambiguous. Just as teleological ethical theories can either be Consequentialism or Virtue Theory, Proceduralism can be Deontology or Bhakti. The interpretive disagreements amongst the Vedantins play a role in determining which is the correct account and this in turn is connected with the question of who the individual self is. The model of the chariot from Death appears deontological: you are the self riding in the Chariot, and you have a duty to reign in the sense and not get distracted by outcomes, which play no justificatory role. But

if one were to identify with the charioteer, then the model speaks to Bhakti: the charioteer must conform to the passenger as its ethical ideal. This in turn leads to the charioteer instantiating the passenger and also achieving the goal of preservation for itself.

The Upaniṣads themselves are vague. The principle ethical ideas here are Yoga (discipline) and Brahman (Development), as essentially connected to the Self as means an End. But the end so understood is not an outcome or state of affairs: it is oneself (*ātmā*). Here, we find a precursor to Kant's famous formulation of duty as treating humans as not only a means, but also an end. But the Upaniṣad model is not about human beings, but about selves, who can instantiate development via discipline. This does not capture the essence of selfhood in terms of ability (as Kant does) but in terms of the self's interest in developing past challenges.

Western ethicists hailing from the Platonic tradition (inclusive of Kant) tend to identify morality with ability. Hence, morality in Plato's account is something that is cashed out by persons of a certain ability (minimally humans, and maximally those who govern desire and ambition via reason). The Upaniṣadic approach is different. Morality is identifiable with the interest one has in development (Brahman). This may not be something we are able to do, but it is an interest we have nonetheless – whether we are dogs, snakes or humans. Yoga, hence, is the effort to bridge our contingent state of ineptitude with our ideal interest in development. Perhaps not every critter is in a position to practice Yoga. But what defines a being with moral standing is not whether it can or does practice yoga, but whether it would *benefit by this practice*. This is development. Development (Brahman) is the Upaniṣad's criterion of moral standing. Those that stand to benefit from development are selves (*ātmās*).

#### 4. The Centrality of the *Kaṭha* Upaniṣad to Understanding Vedānta

From the perspective of the comparative evaluation of the Vedic contribution to ethics, the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* is an excellent and central source. Not only does it provide an internalised critique of Vedic Consequentialism from the perspective of a Vedic Proceduralism, but it also serves nicely to highlight how the Indian tradition is both similar and divergent from the Western, Platonic tradition of philosophy.

What Plato identifies as the self is ambition, desire and reason. The soul in this account is just its capacities. According to this model, our personal identities are bound up with our desires, ambitions and reasons. To evolve or change is to take on new ambitions, desires and reasons. This Platonic account is very similar to the Buddhist account of the self. The early Buddhists also appear to identify the individual with their contingent psychological makeup, but for this reason, they argue there is no permanent unchanging self (cf. *Milindapañha (The Questions of King Milinda)*). On this score, it would seem that Buddhists and Platonists are in agreement. For Plato too, our souls can evolve, and our personal identity as defined by our psychological makeup can change (*Phaedrus* 245c–249d). At a low and early stage, our personal identity is bound up with our animal nature. At an elevated level, we are gods.

The Yogic model from the Upaniṣads, in contrast, identifies the self with an enduring interest in surviving challenges. Life is lived well when our capacities conform to this ideal identity. This is Yoga: a **Procedural** model of self-governance. Here, the self governs as a matter of direction, the mind, reason and senses – what in the Platonic model would have been called the soul, and roughly corresponds to ambition, reason and desire.

The similarity of the Platonic and Buddhist model on the metaphysical side is accompanied by similarities on the ethical side. For instance, given that both identify the self with the contingencies of personal identity, which are often troubled, both focus on asceticism: the denial of the importance of desire. Indeed, in both models, desires ought to be criticised by reason. For Plato, this implies that desire must have a subsidiary role in the soul relative to ambition and reason, and for the early Buddhists, this

shows up in the Four Noble Truths (cf. *Maha-satipatthana Sutta* Accessed 2014), where the trouble (*duḥkha*) is explained as resulting from desire.

The Upaniṣad model, in contrast, suggests that the focus should be on our senses (desires), ambitions (mind) and reasons (intellect) oriented to the self. So, the point here is that we should want (desire) ourselves: this is the point of the passage quoted that states that self-governance involves choosing the self. Reason in this model must play a subsidiary role to the self: in this respect, it is on common ground with the senses and mind. When this occurs, life is developmental.

The view that the Upaniṣadic model of the *ātman* offers us no ethical insight or moral philosophy but only metaphysics has a cost associated with it. If this is true, then we ought to deny that Plato's discussion of the self is not a positive contribution to moral philosophy for it is primarily a contribution to metaphysics. However, Plato sets the agenda for Western moral philosophy, not only identifying the idea of the self that dominates the history of Western philosophy – the self as one's capacities, especially psychological capacities – but also the dominant line of moral philosophy, stretching through Aristotle, Kant and others: ethics is about self-governance. The Upaniṣads also offer a similar model for ethics – but with a switch from the Platonic model. The soul – capacities such as the intellect or reason – is not the self: the self is our authenticity that we ought to serve. It is the purpose of life, and when we properly treat ourselves this way, we exemplify self-development. Hence, when the Upaniṣad's self sets the agenda for what Plato would have called the soul, the self is Brahman. Our capacities become development when we practice self-governance. In contrast, in the Platonic model, to excel ethically is to as though leave the earth. In the Upaniṣadic model, nothing of the sort is entailed. Indeed, to succeed ethically is to live past the threat of Death and to thereby arrive in the realm of Vishnu, the God of preservation. To be with Vishnu, however, is always to be close to the Earth (known as Bhūmi, the consort of Vishnu).

In response then to a series of criticisms of Indian ethics that state that it is world and life negating, we can safely note that this is based on no understanding of moral philosophy. Indeed, this view made famous by those such as Albert Schweitzer (1936), and echoed by latter scholars, relies upon a deliberate confusion that superimposes a Platonic ethics on the Upaniṣad. It is a feature of Plato's ethics that those who are interested in the Good are uninterested in the World. Indeed, according to Plato, philosophers who love the Good must be forced to be kings, for those interested in the Good would have no interest in worldly matters (*Republic* 473d). But the Upaniṣad model of ethics is built on the assumption of survival in the world in the way that drivers of vehicles have the goal of surviving in the world. The goal is nothing that one can maximise and possess in a matter of degree. This goal is none other than oneself.

## 5. Advaita Vedānta

As noted, there is a derivative, scholastic idea of Vedānta that is distinct from the philosophy of the Upaniṣads. This is a tradition of philosophy that cut its teeth on commenting on the *Vedānta Sūtra* (*Brahma Sūtra*) by Bādarāyaṇa. The *Advaita* Vedānta commentary of Śaṅkara is often given importance. It is apparently the earliest of the three major commentaries.

Śaṅkara (*Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* II.iii.33, 36–9), with other major commentators (such as Rāmānuja on *Brahma Sūtra* II.iii.33 and Madva on *Brahma Sūtra* II.iii.33–6) concedes that the individual is an agent. But, with the other three commentators, Śaṅkara holds that the agency of the individual is dependent upon Brahman.

Reflecting back on the model of the chariot from the Upaniṣad, we can certainly see that each self, as the passenger, only becomes an agent of their life when the senses, mind and intellect conform to

the self. In this case, the self's agency is realised because it exemplifies Brahman – development – via the servitude of all the capacities to the interests of the self. We could certainly thereby say that the self is an agent because of Brahman and that this is a kind of explanatory dependency. But the Advaita view of Śāṅkara is more specific: the self in question that is an agent is apparently a kind of confused self – not the enlightened self that exemplifies Brahman. Such a “self” is far more like Plato's soul: the capacities.

According to Śāṅkara, the individual self is a conflation of the subject with what is experienced. In the model of the chariot in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, the individual self that Śāṅkara speaks of is like the mind, intellect and senses hurtling towards objects of desire. In this case, the self that is the passenger, and the objects of desire – the other – are confused by each other as the one is headed for a crash with the other. This confusion creates an empirical self that is less than perfect. The result is what Śāṅkara calls *avidya* – ignorance or nescience. Śāṅkara talks about this empirical confused self as the conflation or superimposition of the self and the other at the outset of his commentary on the *Vedānta Sūtras*.

Ethics, in Śāṅkara's account, are the rules that govern desiring individuals. Such selves are bound by karma. But as karma is action, analysed in terms of choices that result in consequences, the individual self is constituted by karma, as it is hell-bent on objects of desire. For such individuals, Śāṅkara holds that dharma is obligatory, for dharma in this account regulates our actions and choices, relative to outcomes (*Gītā Bhāṣya* 2.11). Indeed, on these grounds, such practices as Vedic animal sacrifice are to be sanctioned (*Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* III.i.25), for they are part of the normative order that works with those who are desire-motivated.

But for those interested in freedom (*mokṣa*), dharma is an evil (*Gītā Bhāṣya* 4:21). It is based on the premise that the confused individual, oriented towards objects of desire, is an agent. But this is part of the problem. So long as we are driven by desire, we do not maximise our freedom. The true self, in Śāṅkara's account, is Brahman. This self is a pure subject, distinguishable from its objects of awareness.

As noted, if one identifies the self with the charioteer, then the model of the chariot affords a Bhakti account: the charioteer must conform serve the ideal and thereby instantiates its interests as practice. While Śāṅkara entertains this idea of the self, he rejects it ultimately for the ideal itself, the passenger. This would hence render his ethics Deontological, as a follower of the Vedas, for now he would have to understand ethics as what keeps us from taking goods seriously as justifying choice. We should hence have no expectation that doing the right thing will result in good outcomes. So Śāṅkara provides us as though two stories: one lower, and the other higher. The lower story based on the incorrect account of the self is Bhakti, but the higher true story is Deontological.

At the lower level, individuals should conform to worldly expectations as part of the service to the moral ideal with the hopes of beneficial outcomes. Religious devotion to Vishnu –the preserver – is on his account part of this activity (Hacker 1995). But as we approach the higher understanding of the self that is Deontological (the one ultimately in charge) we must give up the idea that ethics actually leads to something good. Indeed, it might not, but yet it is apparently obligatory. But here Śāṅkara deduces that this is evidence that dharma is not in the interest of those who desire the specific good: *mokṣa*. We must hence leave dharma behind if we want to pursue the good. Here, Śāṅkara's ethics echoes the early Buddhist idea that dharma is a raft that helps one cross over trouble, but nothing to be preserved or granted anything but instrumental value (*Majjhima Nikaya*, I.134-5).

As an interpretation of the Vedānta, Śāṅkara's model seems confused. First, the confused self that Śāṅkara identifies as the locus of analysis and recommendation is not the self of the Upaniṣads that is ideally unconfused. It is a fiction or construction by Śāṅkara's own account. Secondly, Śāṅkara's discussion of the evil of dharma as appropriate only for those governed by desire is articulated in the context of his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*. There, Krishna argues that dharma should be practiced

either as karma yoga – Deontology – that consists in abandoning a concern for outcomes, or as a means of devotion to the Ultimate Ethical Ideal (who he identifies as himself on the basis of his role in sustaining diversity and ethics itself, *Bhagavad Gītā* III.24, IV.7-8) called *bhakti yoga*, with no concern for return. Both versions of Proceduralism make a claim about the perfection of dharma as a procedural affair, and in strict opposition to Consequentialism. They are also perfectly consistent with the Upaniṣad passages that speak about the yoga of the self as self-governing and beyond concern for outcome. If dharma is as Krishna depicts it, then it is not merely for those who are governed by desire. Rather, it is essential to self-realisation as self-governance. Śaṅkara’s reason for rejecting dharma in favour of mokṣa is that dharma is for those driven by desires, which one abandons for freedom. Yet, a desire for mokṣa (freedom) is also a desire and if the role of dharma is to mediate our desires prudently, as he suggests (*Gītā Bhāṣya* 2.11), then it is unclear how we can get rid of dharma in the pursuit of freedom.

At the end, Krishna claims (without argument) that Arjuna, who may be confused, should abandon all dharmas and focus on him alone (*Bhagavad Gītā* 18:66). Here, it does seem that Krishna is advocating abandoning dharma. Śaṅkara can and does base his moral irrationalism views on this passage. Yet, the *Bhagavad Gītā* is not a strict Upaniṣad, but a remembered (*smṛti*) text that lacks the same authority as the Upaniṣads for Vedāntins. To base an interpretation of Vedānta ethics on the weight of the *Gītā* alone is fine, but this falls short of the standards that Vedāntins set for themselves. Moreover, this famous passage is consistent with Bhakti: if “dharma” is defined Deontologically as something that is justified independently of the outcomes, then the consummation of ethical action according to Bhakti theory would be to stop worrying about Deontology. Here is the analogy: as the practitioner of music, devoted as she is to the ideal of music starts to make great music, she would indeed leave behind her practice understood Deontologically as she approaches the very ideal of music itself.

Finally, Śaṅkara’s own stated view is that the individual self – the empirical self – is an agent (*Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* II.iii.33–36). Yet, this clashes with the idea that the individual self is a fiction that should be deconstructed. If agency is a primitive, then the agency of the individual can be called upon to explain their predicament. But that assumes a prior reality to the agent – prior to the problem. Yet, in Śaṅkara’s account, the individual self’s identity is a function of the confusion of the self and the other. If this is true, then the true self, which gets confused with the other, appears to be an agent. But this is what is denied by Śaṅkara: indeed, if the self that gets confused with the other is the explanation of the empirical self, then it would seem that Brahman is the explanation for the creation of the individual self, for Brahman is the only real self in Śaṅkara’s account that could get confused with the other. But this would make Brahman a creator of individual selves: Vedāntins such as Śaṅkara (at *Brahma Sūtra* II.iii.16), Rāmānuja (at *Brahma Sūtra* II.iii.18) and Madhva (at *Brahma Sūtra* II.iii.19), hold that selves are uncreated. More problematically, this position would entail that the perfect, real self (Brahman) is the explanation of the confused self. However, this would entail a partiality or cruelty on the part of Brahman, which Śaṅkara denies (*Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* II.i.34).

Śaṅkara comes close to affirming that it is Brahman that is the explanation for the individual self. At one point, he affirms a position that is characteristic of Rāmānuja’s philosophy. This is the claim that individual selves are part of the grand, or universal self: Brahman (see Śaṅkara’s *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* II.ii.43–47). However, in Rāmānuja’s account, as we shall see, the essential nature of the individual self is not a confusion of self and other, but to be a servant to Brahman – a position without blame or fault. But, in Śaṅkara’s account, the individual self is a mistake, to be blamed as though for its own errors. As a part of Brahman, it would comprise Brahman’s less than stellar character.

At the outset of his commentary on the *Vedānta Sūtra*, Śaṅkara provides a defence of taking the empirical self seriously. He claims that:

... the means of right knowledge cannot operate unless there be a knowing personality, and because the existence of the latter depends on the erroneous notion that the body, the senses, and so on, are identical with, or belong to, the Self of the knowing person. For without the employment of the senses, perception and the other means of right knowledge cannot operate. And without a basis (i.e. the body) the senses cannot act. Nor does anybody act by means of a body on which the nature of the Self is not superimposed. Nor can, in the absence of all that, the Self which, in its own nature is free from all contact, become a knowing agent. And if there is no knowing agent, the means of right knowledge cannot operate (as said above). Hence, perception and the other means of right knowledge, and the Vedic texts have for their object that which is dependent on Nescience. (Śaṅkara's *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, Introduction)

In Śaṅkara's account, the ultimate self of the chariot in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* model is the ultimate self: Brahman. The individual self is what was called in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* the "enjoyer" – a combination of the self, along with senses, charioteer and mind. His idea seems to be that there can be no knowledge without the enjoyer – motivated by desire. Of course, if we were not confused into identifying with the objects of our experience, there would be no need for right knowledge – in Śaṅkara's account.

### 6. Advaita Vedānta's Moral Skepticism

Advaita Vedānta, especially in Śaṅkara's form, presents a version of moral scepticism, or more strongly, moral irrealism. In this account, there is nothing objective about ethics: it mediates our desire-oriented psychology, and should be dispensed with along with the desire-oriented psychology. As a contribution to moral philosophy, Śaṅkara ranks with moral sceptics from the Western tradition, such as A. J. Ayer (1946), who argued that ethics is a mere expression of emotion and J. L. Mackie (1977), who argued that while ethics claims to speak about the world, it talks about nothing for nothing in the world corresponds to its value claims.

As an argument about what is true in the realm of ethics and reality, Śaṅkara has his fans. Indeed, in many ways, his argument appeals to positivistic intuitions about the construction of personal identity and ethical claims – all which vitiate against taking either very seriously. Given the popularity of such accounts in recent Western moral philosophy, the resurgent popularity of Śaṅkara in recent Indian consciousness among educated intellectuals from India might have something to do with what has been fashionable in the West for some time: moral scepticism.

As an argument about a fiction – the individual self – Śaṅkara does an admirable job of sustaining a dialectic about something that, in his own account, is not real. It is not easy to say true things about a fiction, for with respect to fictions, anything goes. Śaṅkara seems to come close to doing the impossible: saying insightful things about what he takes to be a fiction. One might take this diagnosis to show that Śaṅkara's philosophy is worthless, or that it is an amazing feat of intellectualism.

But perhaps this diagnosis of the paradox of Śaṅkara's moral philosophy – his metaethics, more specifically – applies to moral anti-realists on the whole, who want to say something true about what they take to be fictitious – namely, ethics. If ethics is a fiction, then anything goes in the way of description for fiction has no objective boundaries. If ethics is real, then there are objective things that we can say about this. But this would preclude moral irrealism.

In the case of Śaṅkara, his moral irrealism is his account of the self. We as though are agents, with goals and objectives that need to be mediated by ethics for our own good. But yet, as the very agents

for whom ethics is applicable are not ultimately real but an error, ethical considerations are like a prosthetic for an amputee: they stand in for what ought to be our natural endowment, but is denied to us due to bad luck or injury. Freedom has to do with moving away from injury, but also ethics.

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### **Glossary**

Letter	Term	Definition
A	<i>Advaita Vedānta</i>	Monistic Vedanta
	<i>Ātmā (ātman)</i>	Self
B	bhakti	Devotion. Theory of ethics that defines right action as what causes good outcomes.
	Brahman	Development, Greatness
	<i>Brahma Sūtra</i>	A purported summary of the philosophy of the Upaniṣads. Also known as the <i>Vedānta Sūtra</i>
C	Consequentialism	Theory of ethics that identifies right action in terms of outcomes and states of affairs external to the agent
D	Deontology	Theory of ethics that identifies right action in terms of duties
U	Upaniṣad	Dialogue portions of the Vedas, which comes later in the chronology and of the Vedas
P	Proceduralism	Deontology and Bhakti
T	Teleology	Consequentialism and Virtue Theory
V	Veda	Ancient corpus of text, written over a 1,000 years, of the ancient South Asian branch of the Indo-European people
	Vedānta	End of the Vedas. Or, school of philosophy based on an interpretation of the <i>Brahma Sūtra</i>
	Virtue Theory	Theory of Ethics that defines right actions as caused by good states.

### Points to Ponder

- While Śāṅkara's account of the self as superimposition might not be plausible, it is plausible that a common error in scholarship is that scholars superimpose their own subjective beliefs on what they are studying, resulting in nescience.
- The case of superimposing Platonic philosophy on the Upaniṣads is a case of superimposition,

productive of *avidya* (ignorance).

- The idea that the self is the soul is a largely Western idea, traced back to Plato, who identified the self in terms of psychological factors.
- If the study of Indian philosophy were not stewarded under the cloud of imperialism, that sought to undermine Indian autonomy, it is unlikely the dominant approach to reading the Upaniṣads in scholarship would have been influenced so heavily by Plato, who held that people knowledgeable about the good are least motivated to act on it.