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Ātman, Hinduism



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Synonyms

Ātmā; self; Self; Soul

Definition

The way *ātman* is predominantly understood in Hindu spirituality is derived from the *Upaniṣads*. It is an ontological principle that represents the human “essence” at the microcosmic level, the true and everlasting being in a living person, the true human self, distinct from the body and identical with the cosmic principle *brahman*. While the body dies and is subject to pain and pleasure, the *ātman* is immortal and unaffected by pain, pleasure, etc.

Introduction

The concept of the *ātman* is perhaps the crest jewel of Hindu spiritual philosophy. This concept occupies such an important place in Hindu theology that being a Hindu is almost synonymous with believing in the doctrine of the *ātman*. Belief

in this doctrine in fact constitutes the cornerstone of difference between Hinduism and *nāstika* schools of thought such as Buddhism or Cārvāka.

The concept of the atman as we understand it today was articulated in the *Upaniṣads*. The discourse on the self was immortalized in the famous dialogues between Yājñavalkya and others (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*), Āruṇi and Śvetaketu (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*), Prajāpati and Indra (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*), and Yama and Naciketā (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad*). However, it has a prehistory in the *Saṁhitā* and *Brāhmaṇa* portions of the *Vedas*. The first section of this essay will trace that history briefly. The second section examines the meaning of *ātman* as used in the *Upaniṣads*, qualities of the *ātman*, the locus of the *ātman*, the discourse on knowing the *ātman*, and the issue of the *brahman-ātman* identity. Subsequent to the *Upaniṣads*, the six systems of Hindu philosophy each conceived of the self in a particular way. Others, such as the Buddhists or the Cārvākas, denied the way *ātman* was defined and accepted within Hinduism. The last section deals briefly with the position of the six *āstika* schools and the Buddhists and Cārvākas regarding the *ātman*.

The Pre-Upanisadic Evolution of the Concept

It is well-known that the speculations on the *ātman* began long before the Upanisadic portions of the *Vedas* were composed. However, there are

variations between the pre-Upanisadic and the Upanisadic usage of the term. The Vedic and the Brahmanic usages lack sharply defined contours and are often found in a state of flux of meanings. However, once in a while, a few sudden remarks are also found that at least match with the direction in which the concept of *ātman* was to later develop in the *Upaniṣads*.

According to Louis Renou, since the *Ṛgveda*, the word *ātman* denotes “something which is at the base of the ‘animated’ character of living beings. . .” ([4], p. 151). In the *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā*, the word *ātmanvant* means “animated.” It designates all beings endowed with life. It is also used as an epithet to *yakṣa* to denote the “animated mystery” that resides in the body or in the heart of man ([4], p. 153).

From an etymological point of view, *ātman* is often explained as “breath,” drawing especially from the similarity with German terms like “atmen,” meaning “to breathe.” However, Renou warns against such an etymological derivation of usage that could be deceptive. He concedes that the “most immediately accessible use of *ātman* is that one which connects the term with the wind on the cosmic plane; the *Aśvins* cross the space *ātmeva vātah*. . . ‘like the wind (which is the correlative of) *ātman*’ . . .” ([4], p. 151). However, Renou is critical of equating *ātman* with breath based on the later correspondence between *prāṇa* and *vāta*. According to him, the correlation between *ātman* and *vāta* is secondary and would virtually disappear after the *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā* and that it expressed only rough approximations that would be substituted by concrete ideas of the constituent elements of being. In the *Atharvaveda*, not only does the correlation of *ātman* and wind or breath disappear, but in fact, *ātman* is presented as distinct from breath.

Another possible meaning of *ātman* as “essence” is perhaps expressed when in the older part of the *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā*, it is said of *Varuṇa* “the wind which is thy *ātman*.” Later, it is also said, for instance, of *Soma* that he is the *ātman* of the sacrifice, thus expressing a more general connotation. According to Renou, in the later part of the *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā*, the *ātman* at times represents

a kind of elementary substance and comes near to the notion of “person.”

Renou notes new contrasts that are posited to the *ātman* in the *Atharvaveda*, for example, with *indriya* (sense organs) and especially with *tanu* (body). More significantly, here *ātman* in the sense of the “person” is now being distinguished from external entities, such as “father, son, wife,” “children” or “cattle,” “cows,” etc. New connections are also introduced, for instance, with *antarikṣa* (in the *Upaniṣads*, this will evolve into its connection with the more subtle *ākāśa*). Renou also notes, citing Paul Deussen, that suddenly in a verse appears “an upaniṣadic accent”: “free from desire, wise, immortal, self-existent, satisfied with sap, not deficient in any respect – knowing that wise, unaging, young *atman*, one is not afraid of death” ([4], p. 153).

While the *Brāhmaṇas* inherit these meanings, they especially develop the use of *ātman* as a reflexive pronoun. They also use the word as meaning body. According to Renou, *ātman* “in the *Brāhmaṇas* is not at all unitary or simple notion. It is not the body, nor the person, nor the soul, nor the breath, but something participating in all these elements” ([4], p. 156).

Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa X.6.3.2 recounts the teachings of *Śāṅḍilya*: we are called to meditate upon the *ātman* as, among other things, “made up of intelligence,” “with a form of light,” “ethereal in nature,” “swift as thought,” “this golden *puruṣa* in the heart,” “greater than the sky, greater than the earth. . . greater than all existing things.” Renou points out that “only the identification with the *brahman* is missing. . . or at the most it is implied,” whereas this identification will be explicitly declared in *Chāṅḍogya Upaniṣad* III.14.4 where the same teachings by *Śāṅḍilya* are resumed and amplified ([4], p. 156).

Ātman in the Upaniṣads

Meaning of Ātman

In ancient India, the quest for a fundamental principle in the universe took a turn inward – into the inner life of human beings. In contrast to the earlier part of the *Vedas*, where the focus was

more on rituals, Upanisadic thought was predominantly occupied with the idea of the self. The great idea expressed in the *Upaniṣads* is that of the identity of the fundamental cosmic principle, *brahman*, and its microcosmic counterpart, *ātman* (although some later schools of Hindu thought do not accept an absolute identity between the two, see third section below). Renou argues that while *ātman* and *brahman* were seldom associated together before the *Upaniṣads*, the discovery of this identity between *ātman* and the cosmic principle catapulted the concept of *ātman* to unprecedented heights. The correlation between *brahman* and *ātman* is discussed in later sections of the essay. For the time being, it may be noted that the predominant meaning of *ātman* as used in the *Upaniṣads* is that of an ontological principle that represented the human “essence” at the microcosmic level, the true and everlasting being in a living person, the true human self, distinct from the body, and identical with the cosmic principle.

The distinction of the *ātman* from the body is something to be noted. We already saw that in the pre-Upanisadic literature, *ātman* was being used in opposition to the body and again at times, also as synonymous with the body. In the *Upaniṣads*, *ātman* is understood as distinct and in some senses the opposite of all matter, including the body. The characteristic of matter is that it is perishable, whereas *ātman* is by its very nature immortal. Matter is insentient; *ātman* is of the nature of consciousness. Body is material, and so is the mind, in the Upanisadic framework. In fact, the mind is referred to as subtle body. Body and mind are subject to decay and are insentient. It is important to note that in the *Upaniṣads*, mind by itself is insentient; it can act only because of the *ātman* which is consciousness behind it. The distinction between mind and *ātman* is also to be noted. This, however, should not be taken to mean that the *Upaniṣads* preach about a transcendent self only. This self which is transcendent is also immanent in that it is the substance of which the universe is made. More of this will be elaborated in the course of the essay.

There is, however, another point to be noted. One may bring up the issue of verses II.1.1-5.1 from the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* where a particular

process of progressive reflection is taking place revolving around the concept of “*ātmā*.” In these verses, it is first stated that humans are the product of the essence of food; hence, food (*anna*) is the self (*ātmā*). Subsequently, it is said that there is another inner self – the vital force or breath (*prāṇa*). Thereafter, it is declared that there is yet another inner self – the mind (*manas*). Then it is said that right knowledge (*vijñāna*) constitutes the self that is even interior to the mind. Finally, it is stated that the yet inner self to *vijñāna* is bliss (*ānanda*). The Upanisadic verses in question use the word “*ātmā*,” meaning self, for each of these layers of *annamaya*, *prāṇamaya*, *manomaya*, *vijñānamaya*, and *ānandamaya*. In his commentary, Śaṅkara used the term “*kośa*” instead of “*ātmā*” to distinguish these layers from the *ātman*, the real self. Hence, today, this idea is popularly known as the concept of the *pañca kośa*. It can be said that these verses present their teaching in such a way that it demands the direct involvement of a pupil in a progression of knowledge from a proposition to a better proposition. If one is asked to think of one’s self, one is likely to think of one’s body (*annamaya*) at first, and subsequently, upon reflection, find that there is something deeper and subtler that appears to be the self. It is thus that one progresses toward knowledge. Hence, it can be argued that when *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* II.1.1-5.1 refer to the *annamaya*, *prāṇamaya*, *manomaya*, etc., *ātmās*, they do not indicate the *ātman* but our ordinary sense of selfhood; and the objective of these verses is to push the seeker into a deeper probe, pointing toward the more and more subtle.

Qualities of the Ātman

It is difficult to speak of the *ātman* in terms of its qualities, because, by its very nature, it is without attributes. However, the *Upaniṣads* do speak about certain characteristics of the *ātman* by virtue of which it is possible to distinguish the self from all that is not the self, for example, the body. The most fundamental characteristic of the *ātman* is its immortality. It is neither born nor does it die; it is unborn, constant, eternal, and primeval; it is not killed even when the body is killed (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.18). It knows no old age or decay (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VIII.1.5, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*

Upaniṣad III.5.1, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.5.15). It is everlasting because it is not the effect of any cause; hence it is unconditioned. It does not originate from anything (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.18); it is self-existent.

The *ātman* is pure and effulgent (*Munḍaka Upaniṣad* III.1.5) and free from all evils (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VIII.1.5). It is beyond hunger, thirst, pain, sorrow, and delusion (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VIII.1.5, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.5.1, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.5.15). It is unattached and unfettered (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.5.15). The self is subtler than the subtle and greater than the great (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.20). It is at once smaller than a grain of rice or barley, than a mustard seed, millet grain, or millet kernel but larger than the earth, the intermediate region, the sky, and all the worlds put together (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* III.14.3). This self is omniscient and all-knowing (*Munḍaka Upaniṣad* II.2.7). It is of the nature of bliss (*ānandarūpam*) (*Munḍaka Upaniṣad* II.2.7).

The Seat of the Ātman

But where is the *ātman* located? It has entered into the bodies up to the tip of the nails (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.7) and resides there (*Munḍaka Upaniṣad* III.1.5). The *ātman* within the body is homologous to a razor in a case (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.7). Just as fire which sustains the world is at its source, similarly *ātman* is at the source of the body (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.7). This self is *antaratarāma* – innermost (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.8); it is within all (*eṣa ta ātmā sarvāntarah*) (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.5.1).

However, one can say that its special place of “hiding” is the human heart (not the physical organ). One finds in the *Upaniṣads* statements like: the *ātman* lies deep within one’s heart (*antarhṛdaye*) (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* III.14.3-4); it lies hidden in the heart of every being (*nihito guhāyām*) (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.20). In these contexts, *guhā* (cave) in the *Upaniṣads* is used as synonymous with the cave of the heart (*hṛdaya*). The word *guhā* has the added import of depth as well as concealment and points toward the hidden aspect of the *ātman*. Why was this need to

emphasize the hidden nature of *ātman*? Is it then not possible to know the *ātman*?

Before moving on to the issue of knowing the *ātman*, one brief remark needs to be made about the heart as the special locus of the *ātman*. The *ātman* is not merely lodged in the cavity of the heart, but it is also the place where it is most suitable to perceive it. This objection may be (and was perhaps) raised that if the *ātman* is omnipresent in the body, then how could any one place be its special locus? Śaṅkara’s *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* I.2.11 answers that there is no contradiction between teaching about any one place as the locus for realizing the self and the fact of its omnipresence.

Knowing the Ātman

One of the fundamental points of investigation of the Upanisadic seers was: What is that, knowing which one knows all? *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VI.1.4 brings up the analogy of knowing all that is made of clay by virtue of knowing a lump of clay; and *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VI.1.5-6 repeats the same point by using the analogies of gold and objects made of gold and a (iron) nail cutter and all other iron objects. In all these verses, Uddālaka Āruṇi’s refrain to his son Śvetaketu is that all transformation (*vikāra*) is name (*nāma*) only; the reality in these three cases are clay, gold, and iron respectively. In other words, names and forms are ever changing; but the substance is the same; it is constant; therefore, it is the only reality (*satyam*). Knowing the unchanging substance alone makes known all the changing forms made of that substance.

Then how to know this substance of which all is made? The *Upaniṣads* immediately present a challenge: the fact that the *ātman* is imperceptible (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.5.15). Nobody can see the *ātman* (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.7). When it is viewed, it is seen only in its aspects, performing certain functions (like speaking, seeing, etc.); therefore, all such vision is incomplete. It cannot be seen in its totality. Why?

The answer to this is related to the other great question of the *Upaniṣads*: How to know the Knower (*viññātāramare kena vijānīyāt*)? Clarifying his preceding statement that after realizing the

oneness of existence, one loses consciousness (*saṃjñā*), Yājñavalkya says that one smells, sees, hears, speaks, thinks, or knows something when there is duality, when oneness is realized what should one smell and through what, what should one see and through what, etc., “through what should one know That owing to which all this is known – through what, O Maitreyī, should one know the Knower?” (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* II.4.14). Yājñavalkya more or less repeats this (with some additional statements) to Maitreyī before he leaves home as a renunciate (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.5.15).

All knowledge presupposes a split between the subject and object of knowledge, where the knower is the subject and the known the object. But *brahman/ātman* is not an object of knowledge, like a table or a chair. It is, on the contrary, through the self that the table and the chair are known. It is through the self that all is known (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.7); therefore, the self is the eternal subject of all knowledge. And the knower can never know himself – at least, not in the same way as one knows a table or a chair. To use a Vedantic analogy – it is on account of the eyes that we see the world, but the eyes cannot see themselves; while the fact that we see is proof that the eyes exist! As Yājñavalkya put it to Uṣasta: one cannot see that which is the witness of the seeing, one cannot hear that which is the hearer of hearing, think that which is the thinker of thought, know that which is the knower of knowledge – this is the self that is within all (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.4.2).

In other words, the *ātman* cannot be known through the senses, the mind, or the intellect. The self-existent one (*svayambhu*) made the senses outgoing; that is why one sees the outer objects but not the inner self (*antarātman*); a certain wise man (*dhīrah*) desiring immortality turns his sight inwards and sees the self within (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* IV.1). A desireless man perceives the glory of the self (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.20). Desires make the mind go outward, making it chase objects in the external world; hence, on account of desires, one fails to withdraw the mind within, which is a precondition for the perception of the *ātman*. This effulgent and pure self within

the body is attainable through the constant practice of truth, austerity, complete knowledge (about the true nature of the self), and continence (*Munḍaka Upaniṣad* III.1.5). *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.23 adds another dimension: the self cannot be attained through study, intellection, or hearing; it can be known only through the self to which the seeker prays; it is known when the self reveals its true nature. And the result of perceiving the self is cessation of grief – perceiving this self as bodiless within bodies, as unchanging in the midst of the changing, as great and all-pervading, the wise man (*dhīrah*) does not grieve (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.22).

The unknowability of the *ātman* as an object is perhaps the reason why instruction about it is usually cryptic; it is spoken of obliquely with the help of referents, as it cannot be objectified (as is the case in Yājñavalkya’s dialogues in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* or the conversation between Āruṇi and Śvetaketu in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*). Moreover, the aspirant is also required to intuit or perceive the *ātman* himself (as shown in the Indra-Prajāpati episode in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*). A precondition for this perception is the preparation of the mind through purification.

Brahman and Ātman

The identity of the macrocosmic principle *brahman* and its microcosmic counterpart *ātman* is stated in many an Upaniṣadic verse. For example, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* III.14.4, which amplifies Śāṅdilya’s teachings as we found in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* X.6.3.2, states that “this *ātman* of mine within the heart...is Brahman...” In *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.5.1, Kahola asks Yājñavalkya to explain that *ātman* within all which is the most evident and direct *brahman* (*sākṣādaparokṣādbrahma*). In a similar vein, *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* II.15 states that when one realizes the reality of *brahman* as the very reality of *ātman*, one becomes free from all bondages.

Secondly, the qualities that are attributed to *ātman* are the same qualities that are attributed to *brahman*. For example, *brahman* is the *ātman* that has no sin, no decrepitude, no death, no sorrow, no hunger, and no thirst (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*

VIII.1.5). *Brahman* is great and self-effulgent; it is subtler than the subtle, farther than the far-off yet near at hand (*Munḍaka Upaniṣad* III. 1. 7). *Brahman* after having created (the universe) entered into that very thing; it became the formed and the formless, the sentient and the insentient, etc. (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad* II.6.1). While it is immanent, it is to be found especially within the cave of the heart (*nihitam guhāyām*) (*Munḍaka Upaniṣad* III. 1. 7). The *brahman-ātman* is the knower, the eternal subject of all knowledge, that can never be the object of knowledge, yet it is through this that everything else is known. *Keṇa Upaniṣad* I.2 describes *brahman* as the ear of the ear, mind of the mind, speech of the speech, eye of the eye, etc., that is, *brahman* is that on account of which knowledge itself is possible. *Keṇa Upaniṣad* I.4 cites the ancient people saying that *brahman* is indeed different from the known and above the unknown. In other words, it is neither known nor unknown, because anything that is known is limited, on the other hand, *brahman* being unknown would make knowledge itself an impossibility, as it is through *brahman* that we know, *brahman* is the real knower. *Brahman* cannot be uttered by speech, comprehended by the mind, seen with the eyes, and so on (*Keṇa Upaniṣad* I.5-9). *Munḍaka Upaniṣad* III.1.8 repeats that *brahman* cannot be grasped through the eyes, speech, and other senses; the indivisible *brahman* can only be perceived by the one, engaged in meditation, whose mind has become pure and whose intellect is favorable (by being transparent and tranquil, explains Śaṅkara in his commentary).

The greatest statement of the identity of the macrocosmic *brahman* and the microcosmic *ātman* is perhaps “*tat tvam asi*” that appears as a refrain in the sixth chapter of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. It is one of the Upanisadic *mahāvākya*s (great sayings) and is generally accepted to mean “you are that,” where “that” (*tat*) refers to pure being or *brahman*. However, there is some debate regarding it that should be mentioned. While the Advaita “school” of Vedānta deduces absolute identity between the two on the basis of this statement, the Dvaita thinkers (see below), for instance, question this interpretation and offer their own alternative meanings like “you are like

that,” “you are (attached) to that,” “you are dependent on that,” “you are of the nature of that,” and so on, mainly invoking grammatical grounds ([1], p. 109). On the other hand, modern scholars too invoke a different interpretation on grammatical grounds. According to Joel Brereton, for instance, contextually as well as syntactically, it is not convincing that *tad* stands for *sat*, that is, being. He would rather translate “*tat tvam asi*” as “in that way are you. . .” [1]. Patrick Olivelle agrees with Brereton and prefers to translate “*tat tvam asi*” as “that’s how you are” ([3], p. 560). On the other hand, there are scholars who would give philosophical coherence precedence over grammatical rules (see discussion in [2], pp. 32–33, fn. 16). While, there could be debates – mainly grammatical as they appear – on the meaning of this famous *mahāvākya*, the other verses cited above show other instances where *brahman-ātman* identity is established, at times even quite explicitly.

Ātman According to Different Schools of Thought

The Āstika Schools of Thought

The six schools of Hindu philosophy (*darśana*) – Vedānta, Mīmāṃsā, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, and Vaiśeṣika – that developed mostly after the *Upaniṣads* are *āstika*, in that they accept the authority of the *Vedas*. However, drawing from the same source *Upaniṣads*, they vary in their conceptualization of the self.

There are several schools within Vedānta, most prominent among which are the three – Advaita (non-dualism), Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified non-dualism), and Dvaita (dualism). There are several philosophers within each of these schools, and the history of development of the ideas of each school is long drawn. Here we shall discuss only some representative ideas. These three mainly differ in their ideas about the relationship between *brahman* and the *ātman*. The Advaitin Śaṅkara, for instance, explains it thus: he uses the word *jīva* to denote the individual self which is a subject-object complex. “Its subject-element is Pure Consciousness and is called the Sākṣin [witness]. Its object-element is the internal organ called the

antahkaraṇa [the inner instrument of cognition, consisting of *manas*, *buddhi* etc.] which is bhautika as it is composed of all the five elements. . .” ([5], p. 252). The former, that is, the pure self (which is consciousness and *Sākṣin*) is Brahman, and this identity is realized in liberation.

Rāmānuja, the most prominent name in the Viśiṣṭādvaita tradition, on the other hand, proposes the philosophy of non-dualism qualified by difference. To put it briefly, for him “Unity means realization of being a vital member of [the] organic whole. God or the Absolute is this whole. He is the immanent controller. . . God is the soul of nature. God is also the soul of souls. Our souls are souls in relation to our bodies, but in relation to God, they become His body and He is their soul. The relation between the soul and the body is that of inner separability. . .” ([5], p. 346).

On the other hand, Madhva, the dualist, accepts many of Rāmānuja’s ideas, but his views are divergent on many fundamental counts. For him, difference is so great a fact that he advocates five kinds of differences – that between soul and God, between soul and soul, between soul and matter, between God and matter, and finally, between matter and matter. For Madhva, God is the repository of infinitely good qualities; He is the creator, preserver, and destroyer; He is transcendent, as well as immanent as the inner controller; the human soul is by nature conscious and blissful but is subject to pain and imperfections on account of its association with the body, sense organs, minds, etc. Madhva accepts Rāmānuja’s distinction between matter, soul, and God but rejects his view that the differences between these three have no separate existence but are mere qualifications of identity. According to Madhva, matter, souls, and God are three distinct entities, and their differences constitute their unique natures, respectively [5].

The other schools too have variations within themselves, but here we shall consider only some representative views. Among the Mīmāṃsakas, Kumārila holds that “the self is of the nature of pure consciousness and is illumined by itself” ([6], p. 236). Some scholars disagree with this view, while some others uphold it (for details, see [6], p. 236).

Sāṃkhya philosophy, on the other hand, rejects the idea of a single absolute self and instead postulates the existence of a plurality of individual souls. It postulates two co-present co-eternal realities – *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. *Puruṣa* is the soul, the self, and the spirit; it is pure consciousness, distinct from the body, sense organs, etc. However, there are numerous *puruṣas*; as many individuals, so many are *puruṣas* as their souls or real selves. *Prakṛti* is the uncaused root cause of the universe. (One may doubt if Sāṃkhya can be regarded as consistent with the teachings of the *Upaniṣads*. Despite evident differences between the teachings of the *Upaniṣads* and those of Sāṃkhya, the issue is intricate and cannot be resolved unequivocally. See [5], p. 149, p. 31.) According to Sāṃkhya, the self is an object of inference and “can be inferred from its reflection (*pratibimba*) in *buddhi* as its original (*bimba*)” ([6], p. 260). The perception of the self is an impossibility, because of the split between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. According to Pātañjala Yoga, however, the self can be perceived through higher intuition, but this perception is like the pure self, the subject, intuiting itself through its reflection, the empirical self or the object, in *buddhi*.

Vaiśeṣikas like Kaṇāda hold that the pure self can be perceived but not as an object of ordinary perception; it cannot be perceived through the *manas*. But it can be perceived by higher intuition – a particular kind of conjunction between the self and *manas*, and this conjunction occurs as a result of a particular power (*dharma*) born of meditation [6].

For the Naiyāyika, the self is a permanent substance, a substratum to qualities like cognition, pleasure, pain, desire, aversion, and effort. All Naiyāyikas agree that the self is an object of inference; it can be inferred from its qualities as their substratum. Generally speaking, the Naiyāyikas do not believe that the self can be perceived as it cannot be both “subject and object of the same act of knowledge” ([6], p. 259). But some Naiyāyikas hold that it is the object of perception as well; however, this perception is a special kind of perception (akin to what the Vaiśeṣikas hold).

The *Nāstika* Schools of Thought

A prominent critic of the Vedantic notion of the self is Buddhism. They deny the existence of any self as the *āstika* schools would understand it. According to the Mādhyamika school of Buddhism, the true nature of things is empty of an intrinsic essence (*śūnya*). While the most common approach to interpreting this *śūnyavāda* is to consider it as a doctrine of void or emptiness, counter views to this also exist. Chandradhar Sharma, for example, holds that *śūnya* does not mean “empty void” but “indescribable” as it is beyond the four categories of the intellect ([5], pp. 86–87). The Yogācāra Buddhists go one step further and say that the self is nothing but a stream of constantly changing consciousness lacking in any core substance. The Yogācāras, therefore, hold that the self is but a series of cognitions, where these cognitions alone are ultimately real, and there is no self apart from these cognitions.

Sadānanda, the author of *Vedāntasāra*, speaks of four kinds of Cārvākas: (1) those who identify the self with the gross body, (2) those who identify it with the external sense organs, (3) the ones who identify the self with the vital force, and (4) those who equate the self with the mind (*Vedāntasāra* III.124–27). Some also identify the self with the sons or dear ones (*Vedāntasāra* III.123). Jayanta Bhaṭṭa says that the Cārvākas regard “consciousness as a by-product of unconscious elements, e.g., earth, water, fire, and air.” ([6], p. 223) Hence, the Cārvākas do not hold the self to be an independent, self-existent, conscious entity, as do the *Upaniṣads*. Therefore, the Cārvākas believe that the *ātman* as the *Upaniṣads* understand it does not exist at all; it can neither be perceived through the sense organs or the mind nor inferred (inference is not a means of valid knowledge according to Cārvākas; however, they find no mark of inference either) [6].

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