

## ***Plato and the Upanishads***

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### **I. Introduction.**

In this essay are examined some similarities and differences between Plato's Dialogues and the (early) Upanishads. In giving Greek words I follow the usual transliteration except that I use **u** for the old and misleading *y*: so I write *phusis* instead of *physis* 'nature'. I also innovate in writing the titles of the Dialogues in straight transliteration of the Greek instead of the old unnecessary latinized forms (e.g. *Phaidōn* instead of *Phaedo*); but I retain *Republic* for *Politeia* and *Laws* for *Nomoi* since both are sound current words translating the original Greek titles.

P.T. Raju wrote: "Whitehead said that Western Philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato... Similarly, Indian philosophy can be considered to be a series of footnotes to the Upanishads" (1971: 15). It is relevant at this point to ask "What is philosophy?" and by answering this question to see how Plato's Dialogues and the Upanishads are truly linked.

The word "philosophy" has passed into almost all languages. It is an ancient Greek word *philosophia* and means 'love for wisdom'. This noun and the cognate verb *philosophein* 'to philosophise', appear mainly in the writings of Xenophon and Plato;<sup>1</sup> earlier thinkers were generally called *phusikoi* or *phusiologoi*, i.e. those inquiring into the nature (*phusis*) of the creation (or as Śaṅkara called them, *śṛṣṭicintaka*) or doctors/healers/magicians (*GEL*). Socrates broke away from the *phusikoi* 'physicists/naturalists' (*śṛṣṭicintakās*) and the sophists who sold knowledge; he introduced and laid emphasis on what today we call Ethics, making philosophy a daily practical preoccupation so that a man might with the proper way of life achieve the highest good. He is made by Plato to say in the dialogue *Phaidros* (229E) "It seems to me ludicrous to study things external when I don't know my own self". Plato and Xenophon were both students of Socrates. This love of wisdom and its pursuit was, then, formulated in the Socratic circle (though other schools, like the Pythagoreans or the Eleatics, may have preceded), perhaps by Socrates himself, in the late 5th century BC, just as the golden age of Pericles with its wondrous burst of arts, crafts and sciences was about to end.

In the Socratic-Platonic teaching *philosophia* entailed Self-knowledge. This particular aspect is not entirely new. Some of the pre-Socratic philosophers also refer to self-knowledge. Herakleitos, this enigmatic aristocrat who lived in Ephesus about 100 years before Socrates, says in one of the extant fragments "I sought to know myself" *edizēsámēn emautón*. This quest for self-knowledge is central to Greek thought and is encapsulated in the ancient dictum, ascribed to Chilon and Thales and others of the Seven Sages and, of course, to the Delphic Oracle, "Know thyself" *gnóthi s' autón*; the origin of this tradition is lost in the mists of Greek prehistory (Betz 1970). (But whether this 'self-knowledge' meant exactly what is understood by the upanishadic *ātmajñāna* is a moot point, as we shall see below.) The Delphic Oracle had declared Socrates to be the wisest man in Greece. He himself said repeatedly that he knew nothing since he knew not himself. Wisdom itself belongs to God alone, Socrates taught; but whoever pursues it may be called a philosopher (*Phaidros* 278D). In the same Dialogue the wise soul is said to reach the highest arch of heaven and there see the One True Being, eternal and unchanging *aei on* or *ontos on* (247E). This knowledge, or wisdom, is innate in man and Socrates engaged in dialogue

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<sup>1</sup> The verb *philosophein* was first used by Herodotus, the historian (I, 30), 'to love, pursue knowledge'; according to Cicero, the Roman orator and philosopher (1st cent BC), Pythagoras called himself *philosophos*, 'one who loves, seeks wisdom' and Diogenes Laertius (3rd cent CE) repeats this: see *GEL* under *philosophein* and *philosophos*. Both Cicero and Laertius are too late to give reliable information about Pythagoras. However, if this late tradition is true and Pythagoras (or his early followers) first used these words, the meaning would have been much the same as in Plato, since the Pythagoreans had similar aims and Plato learnt from them as from the Eleatics of Parmenides in South Italy. (The same applies to the presence of *philosophos* in the Heracleitean fragment 35 'Philosophers must be enquirers into very many things'. This fragment is regarded spurious since in others Heracleitos criticizes learned men like Pythagoras, Hekataeus and others.)

with others so as to induce them to look into themselves and in this way to bring to their awareness their innate true knowledge (*Menōn* 80Dff; *Theaitētos* 149Aff). These ideas too are not entirely new and we find them in the fragments of Herakleitos who says that wisdom is single and that knowledge of the self and of measure is within man. The Self (or soul, to be more precise, or reason, in some Platonic Dialogues) is the divine element in man, so we should escape from earthly existence to the level of the gods: this elevation means “becoming like a god (*homoīōsis theōi*) as far as possible” (*Theaitētos* 176A-B). *Timaios* 47b describes the origin of philosophy as follows: “The vision of day and night, of months and circling years has produced the art of number; it has given us the concept of time and also the means of studying the nature of the universe – from which has arisen philosophy in all its ranges.” It is hardly different from the view in *Theaitētos* 155D (seconded by Aristotle) that love of wisdom begins with awe and wonder. The *Timaios* was written largely to explain in terms of the grand cosmic background why man could and should pursue divinization, which was the end of wisdom.

This ‘divinization’ or realization of one’s divine Self, which also goes back in the tradition (as with Empedocles), is to be achieved through sound ethical living, that is practising the noble virtues (*aretē*) of justice *dikaioṣunē*, reverence *eusebeia*, temperance *sophrosunē* etc; through dialectic, which was the acquisition of true ideas through discrimination and reason; and through meditation. This last aspect is either played down or totally omitted from learned studies on the Socratic-Platonic teaching.

There is the outward turn of consciousness through senses and body, writes Plato in the *Phaidōn*, when it is in contact with the material world of change. But there is also an inward turn when the soul inquires by itself (withdrawn from body and senses) and reaches the pure, everlasting and changeless Being (*aei on*) where it rests and is in communion with that: “this state of the soul is called wisdom” (79D). A good example of this practice is given in the *Sumposion* when Socrates himself is said by Alkibiades to have stood in contemplation for hours (220C). This practice too, or something very similar, goes back a long way to the schools of Parmenides and of Pythagoras and the Orphics. One aspect of this practice was called *egkoimēsis* which was sleeping or falling quiet in a temple to obtain prophetic dreams or cure for disease. Peter Kingsley, an eminent hellenist, examines this, calling it “incubation”, and writes: “Techniques could be provided for entering other states of consciousness. Otherwise, the emphasis was placed less and less on being given teachings and more and more on finding the inner resources to discover your own answers inside yourself” (1999: 213).

This system of ideas constitutes *philosophia*, according to Plato. The word “philosophy” today seems to me to have moved far from its original meaning and to be misused when various writers employ it to describe systems, methods and phenomena other than what Plato meant. The maltreatment of the term has become so very common now that people do not realize they are using it to describe quite different activities. Thus one contemporary scientist, A Rosenberg, published *The Philosophy of Science* (2000). Early on in his study Rosenberg writes, “Philosophy of science is a difficult subject to define in large part because philosophy is difficult to define” (p2). The scientist’s difficulty is understandable since philosophy has little to do with science. Apart from this we meet other curiosities like the “philosophy of cooking” or “of travelling” and so on. Philosophy itself is very clearly defined within Plato’s writings: it is the system of knowledge and practices whereby a man comes to know himself, realizes his divine nature and attains immortality; as is said in the *Timaios*, he returns to the region of the gods, to his native star, and lives in immortal felicity (42B). Anything else is not, strictly speaking, “philosophy”, such as also publications on the “philosophy” of cooking or motorcycling and the like: in some of these the writer tries to connect such activities with philosophical principles. What has happened is that the term has been taken over and given arbitrarily to different sorts of disciplines not concerned with Self-realization. (Aristotle and his followers helped with this, but that is another story.) In all such cases, as with Rosenberg, attempts at definition encounter difficulties. Modern science (the sum total of Physics, Chemistry, Biology and the like) has certain characteristics, its well-defined modes of inquiry, in other words, its own methods and nature; but it can hardly be said to have

“philosophy”, except when the term is being misused.

The Upanishads fit most harmoniously within the frame outlined so far. Their basic teaching is that the true self of man (= *ātman*; or, sometimes, *puruṣa* ‘person’) is the same as the self of the universe, Spirit Absolute (*brahman*), and they describe various approaches to discover this true self. This discovery is not an intellectual appreciation or mere understanding in theory and words but a real transformation of being much like Plato’s divinization (or becoming a god): it is a realization not in thought or vague feeling but with one’s whole being so that one sees and experiences everything in oneself and oneself in everything (e.g.: *Īśāvāsyā Upaniṣat*, 6-7) and it must (both teachings agree) take place in this life, in this world – not in some heaven after death.<sup>2</sup> This transformation or realization I take to be the essential link between Plato and the Upanishads and hereafter I shall discuss aspects related mainly to this. Unlike Plato’s Dialogues which are the writings of one author, the Upanishads were composed and/or compiled by many different sages who lived in different periods and places; it is therefore understandable that there should be differences and even contradictions in some areas. Although the Upanishads do not all fully agree on everything, they do agree on this central theme of the identity of *ātman* and *brahman* and variant formulations of other issues do not affect the discussion that follows.

The dates of Socrates and Plato are well known. Socrates was born in Athens in 470 BC and was put to death in 399 when Plato was a young man – his most brilliant and best known student. Plato was born in 427 founded his Academy in 387 and died in 347 BC. For the Upanishads we have no dates, only conjectures. I have repeatedly argued against the mainstream theory which has been assigning them to after 600 and for the early ones I have postulated a date in the mid-third millennium following the *RV* in the mid-fourth millennium and the Brāhmaṇa texts c 3000-2500 BC (Kazanas 2002).

Due to the brevity of this article which yet attempts to cover the major aspects of the Platonic and upanishadic teachings, I tend to use simplifications, avoiding as much as possible the technical terms of professional philosophers (ontology, epistemology, metaphysics and so on). But I also follow the simple language of the texts because in this way the writing will be more readily comprehended by non-experts who have an interest in the subject. For this reason I shall not refer to secondary sources but shall examine the texts only.

## II) Similarities and Differences

Much has been written about Platonic and upanishadic idealism or monism. I indicated some points in the Introduction above and shall discuss several more parallels hereafter. However, it must be realized, as I shall show in section III, that there are some very marked differences and one of them renders the upanishadic teaching significantly different from that of Plato. We shall also find other smaller but equally important differences even though at first sight the similarity may seem very pronounced.

**1) The relation of mortals to gods.** In the *Phaidon* 62B, Plato writes of a “secret doctrine” that men are “under guard” (*en tini phrouarāi*)<sup>3</sup> from which they should not break away; for they are looked after by the gods and they are one of gods’ possessions. In the *Phaidros* 274A, he says that sensible men

<sup>2</sup> *BUI*, 4, 10 states that whoever among the gods knows or wakes up to (*pratibudh-*) the Brahman he becomes That. This seems to be corroborated by *Brahmasūtra* I, 3, 26 which says that beings higher than humans (i.e. gods) may know the Brahman. Saṅkara accepts this possibility. However, here I am concerned with human beings; if one should become a god, that is a different matter.

<sup>3</sup> Many translate here “prison”. This seems wrong. See GEL under *phrouara*, where only this reference and Gorgias 525A is given for the meaning ‘prison’: “custody” might be better. One does not put one’s possessions in “prison”!

should first try to please their “masters” (*despotais*) who are good – i.e. the gods. The idea is repeated in the later *Laws* 902A: all mortal living creatures are possessions (*ktēmata*) of the gods (also in 906A). The idea is that gods are benevolent and care for the welfare of their “possessions”; furthermore, men come from a godly state and when purified and perfected will return to their place among the gods. (This will be discussed in detail in section III.)

In the *BU* (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣat*) we have the same idea but with a difference. First we must take into account that in the *Aitareya Upaniṣat* the Supreme Self generates the worlds and the world-guardians (*lokapāla*) who are the deities *devatā* but arise out of the Puruṣa (II, 1). So in the *BUI*, 4, 10 we read:

“Whoever [among men] knows thus, ‘I am Brahman’ [=Absolute], becomes all this [universe]. Even the gods cannot prevent this accomplishment, for he becomes their very Self. But whoever worships another deity [as other than his own Self], thinking ‘He is one and I another’, he does not know: he is a livestock for the gods. As herds of animals serve a man, so each man serves the gods. If even one animal is taken away, it causes displeasure; what then of many? Therefore it is not agreeable to the gods that men should come to know this [possibility of becoming free].”

Here the gods do not at first like losing their livestock. The implication is that all worldly phenomena, all forces of nature, hold man in captivity obstructing his spiritual progress to freedom, until he reaches Self-knowledge when he becomes the Self of the universe and so commands the gods themselves. This is an important difference from the Platonic concept.

However, both teachings agree that the rise above the ordinary low condition (which is under the gods’ supervision) will be effected through Self-knowledge.

**2) The idea of Self-knowledge** or Self-realization is so common in the Upanishads that we need not discuss it. As the passage cited above (*BUI*, 4, 10) says, “Whoever knows ‘I am Brahman’ becomes the Self *ātman* of all”, including the gods, and this is often repeated in our texts. In the Platonic teaching we have a clear statement in *Phaidros* 230A: here Socrates states, “I cannot yet say according to the Delphic inscription that I know myself; so it seems to me ludicrous, when I do not yet know this, to study irrelevant things... I investigate not these things [=physics, etc] but myself to know whether I am a monstrous, complicated creature... or a simpler being by nature partaking of a divine and undeluded character”. In an earlier dialogue, it was said that Self-knowledge is the “science of sciences” (*Charmidēs* 169D-E).

Here, however, we should note a certain difficulty in the Platonic system. There is no clear concept of Self, as is the *ātman* (the supreme power and substance in man) in the Upanishads. In Plato the real inner man, the true human nature, is divine and immortal, of course, but man’s self is the composite *psuchē* ‘soul’ or *nous* ‘mind’ with *logos* ‘reason’ as its chief godly constituent. Thus the *Phaidōn* says that the soul, once purified of the grosser elements, after death reaches that which is most like itself, invisible, divine, immortal and wise; in this state it is blissful and free of delusion, folly and fear, and lives in truth with the gods for all time (80E-81A). Similarly in the late *Laws* we find that of all man’s possessions the soul is the most divine and “most his-own-self” (*oikeiotaton on*: 726A); and this soul (or a plurality of souls<sup>4</sup> = godly entities) governs all things in heaven and on earth (896D ff).

In stating that the soul is a “possession” (*ktēma*) Plato seems to be unaware that this implies a “possessor”, a being higher than the soul: this he does not explore. From this point of view the Platonic soul would correspond to the *buddhi* or *citta* or *hṛdaya* of the Upanishadic teachings.

<sup>4</sup> This plurality of souls is reminiscent of the plurality of ‘selves’ *puruṣa*- (or *ātman*s) in the Sāṅkhya system. So Raju, p 159; so also Kar (2003: 68). Another point of contact between Plato and Sāṅkhya is duality: soul and body and *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. See end of §4, below.

**3) The image of the chariot** in both teachings represents the soul or the inner man. Here is Plato:

“Let us liken the soul to a pair of winged horses and a driver. The horses and drivers of the gods are noble and good but those of other beings are mixed. Among us humans, the charioteer drives a pair: one of the horses is noble and good but the other is of opposite breed and character. So in our case the driving is of necessity troublesome and difficult... The soul looks after all that is inanimate and roams round heaven... When it is perfect and fully winged it rises up and governs the whole world. But a soul that has lost its wing carries on only until it gets hold of something solid and then settles down taking on an earthly body... The whole now, soul and body fused, is called a living being with the epithet “mortal” (*Phaidros* 246 A-C).

A little later (253D ff) Plato gives additional features. The horse on the right is upright, clean and white, loves honour, temperance and modesty; a companion of true glory, obeying only reason (*logos*), it needs no whip. The one on the left is dark-hued, crooked and heavy; it is a companion of insolence and arrogance and only just obeys the whip. Ultimately however, the state of the soul is determined by the condition of the charioteer as well as by the condition of the horses, whether they have wings or not and whether superiority in strength is with the white horse which obeys reason or the dark one of unreason. The charioteer may be strong or weak according to his education and experience (*Phaidros* 253D-254E).

In the *Republic* Plato analyses extensively the tripartite structure of the soul (starting at 435C) and describes in detail each part (439C ff): there is the part which reasons and should command and is called ‘rational’ *logistikon* (corresponding to the charioteer); that which has appetites and desires and is called ‘irrational’ *alogiston* and ‘covetous’ *epithumētikon* (corresponding to the unruly black horse); and that which feels anger and other emotions like guilt and shame and is called ‘emotional, high-spirited’ *thumoeides*, siding at times with the first part and at times with the second (corresponding to the noble white horse). The three parts are mentioned again in *Republic* 504A, 550B, 580D-581E.

The picture in the *KU* (*Kaṭha Upaniṣat*) is not dissimilar on the whole but it is different in important details. It brings in also the chariot-master (*rathin*) who is the Self, while the whole chariot is merely the embodiment with senses and mind.

“Know the Self as the chariot-master and the body as the car; know buddhi (=higher intellect, reason) to be the charioteer and the mind (*manas*) the reins. The senses are the horses and the sense-objects the pathways. (*KU* I, 3, 1-4.)

Then we have the introduction of the word *vijñāna* which I take as true discrimination or understanding gained through theoretical knowledge and practical experience. The *buddhi* ‘intellect, higher mind’ can be indiscriminating or discriminating, i.e. without or with understanding. In the first case the mind will be unrestrained and the senses out of control; in the second the mind is restrained and the senses controlled. Consequently, only the man who has the discriminating intellect as his driver will have a mind with a firm grasp of the senses/horses and will reach the end of the journey, the highest goal (*KU* I, 3, 9). Here the whole concept is different with the emphasis placed on the *buddhi* (approximating the Platonic “reason” represented by the charioteer) and its power. The *Kaṭha* (I, 3, 10 ff) presents these elements (senses, objects, manas, etc) in an ascending order of fineness and power, as levels of consciousness from which the individual experiences life (himself and the world), the highest level being the self (= *puruṣa*, here i.e. ‘the true or inner man’). Neither the sense-objects and the chariot-master nor the notion of such levels are present in Plato.

**4) The priority of the soul over the body** in Plato is as major an idea as is the priority of the causal or spiritual (*kāraṇa* or *ahhyātmika*) and subtle (*sūkṣma* or *adhidaivika*) levels over the gross material world (*sthūla* or *adhibhūta*) in the Vedic tradition. Thus Plato, restating his doctrine of the pre-existence

of the soul (especially in *Phaidōn* 72E ff, *Phaidros* 245D ff, etc) writes in the *Laws* 896C that “the soul is anterior to the body”. In the *Timaios* the Supreme Creator, the Demiurge, fashions the human souls out of the remains of the substance used for the creation of gods while the gods fashion the gross physical bodies (41D ff). Thus, although divine and immortal, the soul in Plato is something created.

In the Upanishads it is Spirit itself, the force or consciousness of the *ātman* (or *Brahman*, or *puruṣa*) that enters and dwells in material bodies. Many and varied are the modes of presentation of this idea. Here I take that of the *Māṇḍūkya Up* reversing the order given in that brief text. From the *Turiya*, the natural state of the *ātman* which is beyond description and conception, comes the state *Prājñā*, a mass of consciousness (*prajñānaghana*) and pure bliss (*ānanda*), the inner Controller (*antaryāmi*), omnipotent and omniscient. From *Prājñā*, who is the source of everything (*yonih sarvasya*), comes the *Taijasa*, the brilliant-one who experiences the inner world of mind. From *Taijasa* finally comes *Vaiśvānara*, the ordinary consciousness available to all men, which experiences the gross material (*sthūla*-) world.

Here again behind the similarity we find differences. Some scholars find, after delving in Speusippos, Plato’s successor in the Academy, that Plato’s system implies a four-level structure: the One *hen*, which is above existence; mind or intellect *nous*, realm of being and ideas; soul *spuchē* which needs purification and (re-)ordering (see Pearson 1990: 156 with references). This may be so but Plato does not give this structure anywhere in the Dialogues. Usually Plato’s view can be said to be dualistic – soul and body – and in any case the soul is fashioned by the Creator in *Timaios*, as we saw earlier, and does not issue out of the Creator’s own substance as in the Indic texts. In the Upanishad the substance or energy of the indescribable *ātman* descends in three gradations of ever increasing grossness to appear finally as the material embodied being. Now while in the Upanishads, the whole world with its various levels and creatures emanates from the will (and substance) of the Creative Principle (=Absolute or Creator-god), Plato posits a Creator and Matter, out of which is fashioned every form in the manifest world from gods to minerals. This Matter in *Timaios* 30A is described as “whatever was visible (*horaton*) ... and being in disordered motion”: this substratum is separate from the Creator but, like Him, eternal (and so resembles the insentient Prakṛti – with its three *guṇas* ever in motion – of the Sāṅkhya system: Raju, p 159; Kar, p 54-56). We return to this in part III ‘The fundamental difference’.

**5) Desire** is the element in man’s psychological make-up that chiefly maintains his ignorance and prevents him from realising his true nature. Both teachings agree on this.

In Plato, it is desire or appetite *epithumia*, represented by the unruly black horse in the parable of the chariot (soul), that fights against the whip of reason and drags the soul down to earth to be embodied (*Phaidros* 246C, 253D ff). In the *Republic* desires are divided into two categories – necessary (*anangaia*) and unnecessary: the first is exemplified by the desires that cannot be ignored, being necessary and beneficial to man’s health, like the appetite for bread and requisite relishments; the second category consists of non-requisite and even harmful things like unnecessary varieties of foods and beverages (558D-559C). These excessive and unnecessary desires lead man and society to worsening, grosser conditions and finally to perdition (559D ff). Poverty, he writes (*Laws* 736E) is not the decrease of goods but the increase of avarice (*aplēstia*). However, there are also honourable (*kalē*) and good (*agathē*) desires (*Republic* 561C) and these can and, with the guidance of reason, do lead to “a temperate, brave, wise and healthy life” of physical and spiritual excellence in nobility, rectitude, virtue and good repute (*Laws* 732E-734D). After all, ‘love of wisdom’ is itself one such noble desire.

The upanishadic view concurs fully with all this – but with variations resulting from its different nature.

The creation (the ever-changing phenomenal multiplicity of the world) begins with desire *kāma* which (according to the Nāsadiya Sūkta, *Ṛgveda* X, 129) is the “first seed of mind”. In the Brāhmaṇas and Upanishads we find repeatedly that Prajāpati is desirous of offspring (eg *Prasna Up* I, 4) or

expansion or something similar and begins to create. Desire is presented as the cause of division or fall from the initial Unity. Thus, in the beginning, the self in the form of *puruṣa* desired (*aicchat*) a companion and so divided himself into two (*BU I*, 4, 1-3). The embodied man's bondage in ignorance and desire is described well in *Maitrī Up III 2*: "Now he, indeed, who is said to be in the body is called the elemental self (*bhūtātma*-)... affected by the *guṇas* (=forces, qualities) of material nature *prakṛti* ... sinks into total delusion and no longer sees Himself, the bountiful Lord ... swept along by the current of the qualities, defiled, unstable, changeable, cut off, full of desires (*sasprha*-), scattered, he falls into arrogant identification (*abhimānitva*) 'I am he, this is mine': with such thinking he binds himself with himself like a bird in a snare."

However, here also, escape from this bondage and delusion is initiated by a 'good' desire for knowledge and the return to Unity. This desire is exemplified in young Naciketas who, despite the rich, alluring offers of Yama, insists on obtaining the knowledge that leads to self-realization in *KU I*, 9ff. In the same Upanishad, the distinction between desires is made quite clear: "The fools run after external desires and fall into the net of widespread death; but the prudent and firm, having known of immortality, do not seek the permanent here among things impermanent" (*KU II*, 1, 2).

**6) Education** is another matter on which the two traditions agree -with some minor differences. If people live in ignorance, or if it is thought that they do so, then, obviously some form of education is needed to guide or lift them out of it.

For Plato a primary consideration is that education should not be compulsory. He justifies this by saying that a free mind should not pursue any study under compulsion because, otherwise, this will not stay (*Rep* 536DE). Large sections, if not the entire *Republic* and the *Laws*, were written with this purpose, to provide principles and methods of education from the very earliest age (*Rep* 317 ff; *Laws* 788D ff, 808C). Education is divided into preliminary or lower and higher, which is more arduous (*Rep* 498B ff, 503B ff; *Phaidros* 274A; *Laws* 807E ff, 967E) and has for its coping stone the Dialectic which constrains rather than persuades (*Rep* 487C; *Hipparchos* 232B) and leads to truth (*Rep* 499; *Philēbos* 58C-D): this was an extension and refinement of the Socratic method of enquiry (=question and answer) whereby one is helped to arrive at true notions or the true knowledge that is innate in our being (especially *Menōn* 81C-85C where Socrates elicits out of a servant-boy the knowledge of the Pythagorean theorem). The aim is to protect man from vice and promote virtue (*Timaios* 87D); or attain temperance and perfection by subjugating desires (*Laws* 647D) and by being always directed towards the good (*agathon*: *ibid* 809A). Goodness is, of course, closely linked to truth and as "Of all good things for gods and men truth stands first, a man should partake of it as early as possible so that he might become blessed and happy" (*Laws* 730B-C).

Unlike other thinkers or the sophists of his day, Plato did not believe that education consisted in putting knowledge into the man's mind (like inserting sight into blind eyes) but rather in using one's indwelling powers (*Rep* 518C). This entire process of education, i.e. avoiding vice and practising virtue, restraining desires and turning towards goodness and truth, is elsewhere called by Plato *katharsis* 'purification', which frees the soul from the bondage of the material world (*Phaidōn* 67C). All this is based upon Plato's doctrine that knowledge is truly memory or recollection which in turn is based upon his belief in reincarnation. The idea of recollection is that since the soul originates in heaven and has passed through many reincarnations, it has the knowledge of the truth belonging to the heavenly sphere but also that of the phenomena of the material world in which it has been repeatedly embodied (*Menōn* 81; *Phaidōn* 72-84B; etc). This knowledge is forgotten or covered over at birth but thereafter all learning is in fact the uncovering or recollection of that indwelling knowledge (*mathēsis oude allo ti ē anamnēsis* 'learning is nothing other than recollection' : *Phaidōn* 72E).

Very similar ideas are found in the Upanishads though not formulated in exactly the same way. Here also are mentioned two types of education, or strictly knowledge, the higher *parā* and the lower

*aparā*: the lower is that of learning the Vedic texts and various sciences while the higher is that by which one comes to realize the Imperishable (*Muṇḍaka Up* I, 4-6). However, I shall not dwell here on the similarities but examine some important differences.

The central teaching of the Upanishads is that all this universe is the Brahman, the Absolute: as the *Chāndogya* puts it *sarvaṃ khalv-idaṃ brahma*, III, 14, 1. From this it follows that the self of man is also the Absolute, as *BU* II, 5, 19 puts it, *āyam ātmā brahma*. Consequently, the chief if not the only aim of education must be that a human being should be reminded of and should meditate upon this truth and so re-cognize or realize that *ahaṃ brahmāsmi* 'I am the Absolute' (*BUI*, 4, 10).

It is understood that not all, not even many, people are ready to embark on this study. Although this teaching is a very simple and reasonable proposition (since all things must have ultimately the same origin in one primal cause, whether this be called 'spirit' or 'substance'), most people seem unable to grasp it and prefer to worship different deities or entertain sceptical or atheistic views. The few who seek *ātmajñāna* or *brahmavidyā* 'knowledge of the Self or the Absolute', which is regarded as the higher knowledge, have passed through a process of 'education' either by the hard and painful lessons and experiences of daily life or, more frequently, by the traditional formal system of ethical injunctions not to harm other creatures, speak the truth, worship the gods through meditation and ritual, give alms and so on. Moreover, the Vedic tradition had the system of four *āśramas*, which covered the life of the individual – for the three upper *varṇa* of *brahmin*, *kṣatriya* and *vaiśya*. (Although at different periods the Greeks, and pre-eminently Plato, recognised the existence of three broad classes of people with different functions in society approximating the Indian *varṇas*, they had no such institutionalized forms.) After the stages of the student and the householder, any man could, and many did, abandon their ordinary mundane life, followed some form of asceticism and even became *sannyāsin* with the purpose of Selfrealisation.

Of course Selfknowledge could be sought at any stage of life, including that of the student. Young Naciketas in the *Kaṭha* is only one example. The *Chāndogya Up* IV, 4 gives the story of young Satyakāma, who, despite his undistinguished parentage, became a student of sacred knowledge and was taught by various animals and fire and finally his human teacher, and eventually became himself a teacher. Equally traditional was for a father to pass the sacred knowledge to his son (*Ch U* III, II, 5 and, exemplified, VI, 8 ff).

Plato devoted the whole of the *Republic* to show that a society would really prosper only if it were governed by wise men or philosopher kings: in discussing the moral traits of the guardian-rulers (357B ff), he stressed the characteristic of 'love of wisdom' (376C). He reiterated this theme in the *Laws* 709C, 710B, 875C. The *Chāndogya* preserves the memory of an age when a righteous king ruled and in his kingdom "there [was] no thief, no miser, no drunkard, no man without the sacrificial fire, no ignorant person, no adulterer or courtesan" because "he himself was studying the Universal Self" (*ChUV*, 11, 3-5).

**7) Reincarnation** is yet another phenomenon on which Plato and the Upanishads agree, but, again, with some differences.

Plato broaches the subject in *Menōn* 81B-D then develops it in *Phaidōn* 72 ff, *Phaidros* 248C, etc. He says very simply "whoever lives justly obtains a better lot [in his next embodiment] but if unjustly then a worse lot" (*Phaidros* 248E). In the *Republic* this is restated and expanded ("we should each take care, neglecting all other studies ... to discover the teacher who will give [us] the power and knowledge to discern the good life from the bad and in every condition choose the better" 618C) just before this passage, in Er the Pamphylian's vision of the other world, the souls select their next life "according to the habits of their former lives" (620A). And here, in this mythical scene, the three Daughters of Necessity make the final arrangements: *Lachesis* assigns the *daemon* guardian of this life; *Klōthō* turns the spindle to ratify the destiny of the chosen life; and *Atropos*, by setting the limits, makes the life



irreversible; whereupon each soul passes from the Plain of Oblivion and drinks from the river of Forgetfulness and gets reborn (620D-621B).<sup>5</sup> In *Timaios* the succession of reincarnations proceed both downward and upward, passing through human and animal forms according as the creature loses or acquires *nous* ‘mind, reason, intelligence’ (42B-C; 91-92C).

The Upanishads say much the same. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* states that good action determines a good future and bad action a bad one (III, 2, 13). Later it explains that the man who is attached to his desires and the results of his actions, goes, after death, to the corresponding world and then “returns to this world for [fresh] action” (IV, 4, 6). The *Chāndogya* V, 10, 7 is more specific: “Those whose conduct here is good can expect to obtain a good birth as brahmin, kṣatriya or vaiśya; but those of foul conduct can expect a foul birth as a dog, a hog or an outcaste” (cf also *KU* II, 2, 7).

The Upanishads give us also the distinctive detail of the Pitṛyāna and the Devayāna paths: here the essence that is to be reborn follows the first one and that which ascends and finds release goes by the second (*BU* VI, 2, 2; VI, 2, 9-16; *ChU* IV, 15, 5; V, 3, 2; etc).

**8) Necessity** (*anangē*) plays a fundamental role in Plato’s scheme of the world. I mentioned it above in connexion with the soul’s return from the fields of heaven. Plato does not describe anywhere its function in detail nor its exact place in the order of the creation. It is a very great Power, establishing, or embodying, the order itself of the Cosmos and we are told repeatedly that even the gods obey it constantly. Thus in the *Sumposion* it is said that all the strange doings among the gods are due to the dominion of Necessity (197B). In the *Law* we are told “no god has the power to compel Necessity” (741A; 818B). However, in *Timaios* this intractable power becomes somewhat mollified: here Plato tells us “the generation of this cosmos originated in a combination of Necessity and *Nous* ‘reason’” inasmuch as *Nous*, being in control (*archontos*), persuaded Necessity to direct most generated things to the best end and Necessity yielded to this intelligent persuasion (47E ff).

In the Vedic tradition the concept closest to Plato’s Necessity is perhaps the Rigvedic *ṛta* ‘cosmic order’ or ‘course of Nature’. The short cosmogonic hymn X 190 says that *ṛta* (and *satya* ‘truth’) was generated out of *tapas*, but in all the hymns where the word occurs it denotes a Power that may not be infringed: eg Uṣas, the Dawn, never deviates from *ṛta* (I, 123, 9). Then, everything flows from the Seat of *ṛta sādanād-ṛtāsya* (I 164, 47) and Mitra and Varuṇa have their great power through *ṛta* which they uphold and promote (I, 2, 8; cf also V, 63, 7); god Agni, again, is repeatedly called *ṛtāvan-* ‘observer of, true to, order’ (I, 77, 5; V, 6, 5). And so on.

In the Upanishads this concept of *ṛta* is not mentioned explicitly anywhere; here the word has the sense of ‘reality, good conduct’ (while *anṛta* is the opposite). But the lawful course of Nature or ‘cosmic order’ is implicit in various phenomena and processes. One such case is clearly reincarnation which depends on cause and effect; other cases are the order of the elements as in *Prasna Up* IV, 8, and *Taittirīya Up* II, 1, 1 and 8, or the five sheaths (*kośa*) in the same Upanishad II, 1, 8.

The most explicit statement is perhaps found in *Īśāvāsya Up* 8: *svayaṃbhūr yāthātathyato ’rthān vyadadācchasvatibhyaḥ samābhyaḥ* “The Self-existent has allocated [all]things appropriately through the endless aeons”.<sup>6</sup> *BU* III, 8, 9 also states that it is by the command of the Imperishable that all cosmic entities hold their position and perform their function. (Cf also *KU* II, 3, 3.) So Necessity in the Upanishads would seem to be the Will of the Absolute.

<sup>5</sup> We should note perhaps the different landscapes encountered by the ‘soul’ on its way to Brahmaloḥa in *Kauṣītaki Up* I, 3-7: lake Āra, watchmen Muhūrtas, river Vijarā (= ‘non-ageing’) etc.

<sup>6</sup> P. Olivelle retains the phrase *yāthātathyatas* in the text but does not translate it – following P. Thieme who thinks it a gloss: pp 406-7; but he gives the full translation on p 613, note 8.

**9) The idea of Macrocosm and Microcosm** will be the last aspect to be examined under this heading.

Adopting the notion of Empedocles that all things are constituted from the “four roots” (*rhizoma*), i.e. fire, air, water and earth, but making them compounds, Plato assigns these to the cosmic body and to man’s embodiment (*Timaios* 53C ff). So also the movements of the cosmic soul are reflected in the soul of man (41E-42E). Plato had dealt with the soul in many earlier Dialogues – *Phaidros* 245C, *Republic* 435E, *Theaitētos* 185E, *Laws* 869A, 897A, etc. In the *Timaios* he goes one step further and presents in detail the connexions between the parts of the soul and the physical body of man (49E ff; 69C ff). The immortal principle of the soul is placed in the head. The mortal is then divided in two: the part which has courage (*andreia*) and spiritedness (*thumos*) is planted in the chest proper, between neck and midriff, where the heart and lungs are; the other part which has the appetites for food, drink and other bodily wants is placed between the diaphragm and the navel – and here the liver is presented, perhaps not without some irony, as an oracular or mantic centre since this organ reflects, we are told, various movements from the mind (71A-72C). There are, of course, many more details, but these are the main points.

In the Upanishads the individual *ātman* (the same Self in all creatures) is indeed the Universal Self *brahman* – *ayam-ātmā brahma* (*BU* II, 5, 19). So it is with all the constituents of man’s embodiment: they are all temporarily separated parts of universal elements coherently organised within the individual embodiment. This is very clear in the words of Ārtabāga describing to Yājñavalkya the dissolution at death:

“when a man has died, his speech merges into (*apyeti*) fire, his breath into air, his sight into the sun, his mind into the moon, his hearing into the quarters (*disas*), his material body into the earth, his self (*ātman*) into ether (*ākāsa*, also ‘space’), the hairs of his body into plants, the hair of his head into trees and his blood and semen into water...” (*BU* III, 2, 13.)

Other examples of such homologies (=correspondences, connexions) are found in *BUI*, 1, 1-2 where cosmic elements are connected or identified with parts of the horse; also in *Ch U* III, 13, 1-5 where the heart has five openings for the gods and these are identified with the five *prāṇas* and other functions, individual and cosmic.

Thus in both traditions man is seen not as a separate, unconnected creature, but as an integral part of the Cosmos. In the Upanishads, more clearly, man contains all cosmic elements from the highest to the lowest and can, with proper education, realize the cosmos within himself. Realizing oneself as Brahman over and above the cosmos, one becomes All and then All serves him.

There are, of course, several other aspects that could be examined but I shall stop here and turn to the most important difference between the two teachings.

### III. The Fundamental Difference.

This concerns the origin and end of man.

In Plato the origin of man appears in at least three versions. **a)** In *Sumposion* 189C ff Aristophanes talks of the original spherical creatures (some androgynous) who were sliced in two by Zeus, but nothing is said of their genesis. **b)** Elsewhere, with slight variations, men spring from the Earth (*Menexenos* 237D; *Politikos* 269B; *Protagoras* 320D ff). **c)** The most important description occurs in *Timaios* 41D ff: here the Demiurge fashions human souls *in the form of stars* and equal in number to them out of the residue of the material used for the creation of gods but now shaken and mixed to a second and third degree of grossness while the gods (themselves created earlier by the Demiurge) fashion the physical bodies in which the souls will be incarnated.

The end of man is analogous. Since man (the soul which is his essential immortal being) is created from secondary materials and at a level lower than the Creator himself, his final destination cannot be

different. Plato nowhere hints that man issues from the very substance of the Demiurge, who is the Supreme God-creator. The embodied souls, if they retain (or regain) their purity, will, on death (or after the necessary re-embodiments), return to their stellar form in heaven: this for Plato is liberation and immortality. If the souls misbehave while embodied in this world, they will transmigrate to lower forms, even worms and shellfish – until even these one day remember their true origin and return to their heavenly state in the star-zone (*Timaios* 41D ff, 90E ff). They do not unite with the Creator. In *Phaidros* too the souls of the blest reach the uppermost celestial limit and behold the area “beyond/above heaven (*hyperouranios topos*)” and gaze upon True Being (*on ontos*) but do not cross the border line (247C-E). So they remain in immortal felicity (*Timaios* 42D) as eternal luminaries, but apart from True Being.

This idea is found in some Vedic Hymns also (*RV* X, 68, 2; 107, 2; 154, 5; *AV* XVIII 2, 47) where wise men and heroes have gone to the sun or the stars (the 7 ṛṣis as the Great Bear), as distinct from Yama’s resting-place, in the realm of light in the highest heaven (*RV* IX 113, 7-11; X, 14, 8; also *AV* XI, 1, 37, etc). But it is not found in other Indo-European branches nor in Homer and Hesiod, where the dead go to Hades below earth (and the heroes to the Island of the Blest, somewhere in the western Ocean).<sup>7</sup> It is found also in Egypt and it seems probable that Plato took the idea from there. In the Upanishads the heaven and its constellations are part of the transitory manifest creation, as the *Maitrī* puts it poetically: “All this is perishable (*kṣayaīṣṇu*)... The great oceans dry up; the mountains get levelled; the fixed pole-star deviates; the ropes [that hold the stars] are cut; the earth gets submerged; the gods depart from their stations”. The passage ends with the poignant question: “In such a world of *samsara* [=wandering back and forth] what good is it pursuing the enjoyment of desires?” (I, 4).

Very different is the situation in the Upanishads. Brahman is before creation. The whole universe with all its worlds and creatures arises out of the substance of the Brahman, contains it and remains in that substance and finally dissolves back into it. And so it is with man. The substance of the Absolute in man is termed *ātman* and this *ātman* is the Absolute all the time. Although the texts often speak of returning or merging with the Absolute, this is due to language limitations or metaphorical expressions. There is no actual journey, return or merging: the *ātman* is *brahman* all the time. This is what has to be realized with one’s whole being or consciousness. The only element that seems to “travel” and change from one embodiment to the next is *karma* ‘action’ (*BU* III, 2, 13). With the dissolution of this *karma* and its attendant cause, desire *kāma*, “When all the knots of the heart are cut here” (*KU* II, 3, 15), the mortal man becomes immortal.

Absolute and final liberation *mokṣa* is the realization of the identity of *ātman* and *brahman* in a practical sense in actual experience. But apart from this, the Upanishads recognise a limited fulfillment in a kind of paradise called *brahmaloka* ‘the world/heaven of Brahmā’. This is limited in that the good and virtuous ‘soul’ stays there for the period merited by its good deeds (sacrifices, alms-giving, etc) and then has to start again in a new embodiment in this world. So *Muṇḍaka* I, 2, 5-7 states “this is the *brahmaloka* for you won by good deeds (*sukṛta*)”.<sup>8</sup> In any case this paradisaical *brahmaloka* is itself part of the Creation and will one day be dissolved back into the Unmanifest to await the next cycle of creation. Thus stay in this world is only a limited immortality or eternity. True liberation and immortality is

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<sup>7</sup> That constellations or stars like the Pleiades, Hyades, Orion etc, were formerly people is an idea found in Greek texts only at c 500 BC and after. There are one or two later dubious ascriptions to Hesiod but no attestation in the surviving Homeric and Hesiodic texts themselves. So the idea may have come from Egypt. However, there are some Orphic fragments (gold plates in tombs) suggesting that the soul goes to heaven; these are from c 400 BC but they may represent a much older tradition. On the whole, the situation is unclear.

<sup>8</sup> See also *BU* VI, 2, 15-6; *ChUV*, 10, 1-2; *Kauṣītaki* I, 2; etc.

beyond it all in the *brahman* – and this is totally missing from Plato.<sup>9</sup>

#### IV. Concluding Remarks.

Given the many similarities between the Upanishadic tradition and the Platonic school and taking into account other similar doctrines in the earlier Pythagorean and Orphic teachings, many scholars naturally wonder whether there were contacts (or cross-influences) between India and Greece before Alexander's thrust into N-W India in the late fourth century BC. There are some indications that some contacts may have taken place. But this issue requires a separate study.

There are important differences, as we saw, between the Dialogues and the Upanishads. On the other hand, the similarities are just as significant. Both teachings emphasize the man's need to free himself from his slavery to desires and his blinding attachment to mundane pursuits and to turn inwards to his true self, the immortal aspect of his being.

In the Eastern Mediterranean the idea of the Unity of Being, the identity of the self (or soul) with the Absolute (or Godhead) appears some centuries after Plato in the Gnostic (or Proto-Christian) teachings. One quotation from the gnostic *Gospel of Truth* should suffice: "And in you dwells the light that does not fail. (...) Be concerned with yourselves... not with other things. (...) This is the Father [=Godhead], from whom the beginning came forth, to whom all will return. (...) They rest in Him who is at rest... and the Father is within them and they are in the Father, being perfect" (Robinson 1990: 7, 49-51). Among the thinkers of this interesting period (the first three centuries of the Common Era), Maximus of Tyre (flourished 150-180 AD) taught the same idea (going beyond Plato's and the Middle Platonists' view): "The end of the way is not heaven, nor the celestial bodies... But one must reach beyond these and stretch over (*huperkupsai*) heaven to the true region and the peace thereat" (Lilla 1971: 189). In the Platonic tradition itself the Unity of Being takes flesh in the Neo-Platonist Plotinus who flourished in the third century CE.

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<sup>9</sup> Th Mc Evilly argues (hopelessly) that the upanishadic teaching *is* in Plato. He cites *Menōn* and its recollection doctrine; the pre-Socratic notion that to *know* something is to *be* it; the Christian Neoplatonist Philoponus who says that the Ideas actually exist in the soul; the *Chāndogya* VIII, 1, that "The little space within the heart is as great as this vast Universe"; the *Timaios* 43D that the human soul is the microcosm of the World Soul; Plotinus saying "all things are everywhere and all is all and each is all" (*Enneads* V, 8, 4); a Buddhist text that "Each contains complete within itself all the Ten Thousand forms" (2002: 165-6). All these are clearly irrelevant. The fact is (and Mc Evilly ignores it completely) that in the *Timaios* human souls *are created* from secondary material by the Demiurge (do not issue from Himself, or, are not of His own substance) and *never* unite with Him but remain, even when utterly pure, as stars, apart from Him!

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