

# The One and the Many

## A Fundamental Philosophical Problem in the Principal Upanishads

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

Cosmological speculations in India date back to the later portion of the *Rig-Veda* and the *Atharva-Veda*. Both scriptures are replete with cosmogonic and theogonic materials. These early reflections—partly metaphysical and partly mythological—formed the stepping-stone of the great philosophical quest of the Upanishadic sages. The pivotal problem implicit in their endeavors to arrive at an understanding of the nature and origin of the universe was that of the relation between the One and the Many, the Infinite and the Finite.

On the one hand there is the singular ultimate Reality (*eka*), verified in rare states of spiritual exaltation and consolidated by profound reasoning, and on the other hand there is the impinging reality of multiplicity in everyday experience. What is their relationship? Can there be any relationship between them at all?

Out of this concern arose the philosophical theories of causation of later times, such as the *parinâma-vâda* of the Sâmkhya system and the *vivarta-vâda* of Advaita Vedânta. How did the Upanishadic thinkers approach this fundamental issue of all types of mysticism? In what terms did they couch their solutions? It is these two questions which I shall try to answer, if only tentatively, in this essay.

It should be emphasized at the outset that there is no uniformity either in the treatment or in the proposed solution of this problem in the *Upanishads*. The statements range from purely mythological and allegoric utterances to genuine philosophical formulations. The latter are by far the rarer of the two types of statement, and the majority is a conglomeration of both.

The mythological-allegoric procedure is exemplified in the following passage from the *Brihad-Âranyaka-Upanishad* (1.2.1ff):

There was nothing whatsoever here in the beginning. This [i.e., what is now the universe] was concealed by death, [or] by hunger; for hunger is death. That produced the mind [which willed]: "Let me become embodied."

Death signifies here the nonexistent, which is not the same as the negation of being; it is rather no-thing-ness—that super-sensuous "entity" that is the ground of everything that populates the spatio-temporal universe. It implies a sense of positivity, since hunger is not merely the absence of nourishment, or death the absence of life. This view of creation is repeated in other passages of the same text and also in other *Upanishads*, as for instance the *Chândogya-Upanishad*(3.12.1-2):

In the beginning this [world] was nonexistent ( *asat*). [Thereafter] that was existent. It grew. It turned into an egg. It lay for the period of a year. [Then] it burst open. From the

egg-shell emerged a [part] of silver and a [part] of gold. That which was of silver is this earth. That which was of gold is heaven. . . \*1

This view is criticized by Uddâlaka Aruni, who was one of the two leading authorities in the early Upanishadic era, the other being Yâjñavalkya. Uddâlaka Aruni affirms (*Chândogya-Upanishad* 6.2.1) that in the beginning there was Being (*sat*), “one only without a second” (*ekam eva advitîyam*). Uddâlaka then asks his philosophical disputant how an existing thing can arise out of nothing. Yet his rebuke of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* seems to be based on a misunderstanding of the concept of *asat*, which is used only in contradistinction to *sat* but does not signify the total negation of being. It stands rather for pure potentiality.

A striking mythological account of the origin of the universe is given in the *Brihad-Âranyaka-Upanishad* (1.4.1ff):

In the beginning this [universe] was a kind of person (*purusha-vidha*). Looking around, he saw nothing but himself. He first uttered: “I am he.” Thus the designation “I” arose. Hence even today when addressed, one says “this is I” . . . (1)

He verily was not happy. Hence once who is alone is not happy. He wished for a second. He became as large as a man and woman in intimate embrace. He divided this entity (*âtman*) into two. From that originated husband and wife. . . . He became united with her. From this human beings were born. (3)

This is an archaic model found in the cosmogonies of many non-Indian peoples as well.

The first chapter of the *Brihad-Âranyaka-Upanishad* is evidently composed, to a large extent, of a collection of several fragmentary cosmogonies of a predominantly mythological character. These intimate a mystical knowledge of the ground of creation. Some represent a first attempt to formulate the Intangible. But the language is nowhere precise, categorical or definitive. The descriptive and allusive element prevails, as in the *Chândogya-Upanishad* (1.4.11):

In the beginning this [world] was *brahman*, one only. That, being one, did not flourish . . . [Therefore it created the four social orders.]

And again in 1.4.17:

In the beginning this [world] was but the Self ( *âtman*), one only. . .

*Âtman* is *brahman* seen within the person. *Brahman* is *âtman* seen within the world. Their identity is the celebrated notion of the mystical philosophy of the *Upanishads*. The substratum of the universe and the essence of man coincide. The pioneering indologist Paul Deussen remarked on this: “This idea alone secures to the *Upanishads* an importance reaching far beyond their land and time . . .”<sup>2</sup> This pre-temporal undifferentiated continuum is characterized as the origin or birth-place of the world of name and form, that is, of the mental and physical objects.

The question arises: What is the ontological status of the world? Is the creation real or illusory? What seems implied in all passages without exception is that whatever has

emerged from, or has been emanated by, the ultimate Reality is itself real. The world is not a mere phantom or a mental projection. It really is “out there.” Deussen, well known for his monistic bias, was absolutely wrong when, for example, he says with reference to the *Katha-Upanishad* (3.1): “. . .where the two, God and the soul are contracted as light and shadow, which intimates that the latter has no reality of its own.”<sup>3</sup> But the world is real. This basic contention is implied in the doctrine of the two forms of *brahman* announced in the second chapter of the *Brihad-Âranyaka-Upanishad* (see 2.3.1ff). The one form is the eternal, formless world-ground/soul-ground, and the other is the finite universe woven by space and time. This view is also implied, for instance, in the following passage of the *Brihad-Âranyaka-Upanishad* (2.1.20):

As a spider moves up the thread, as small sparks emit from the fire—even so from this Self are emitted all the life forces, all the world, all deities [and] all beings. . .

Compare this with the *Mundaka-Upanishad* (1.1.7):

As a spider issues and withdraws [its threads], as herbs spring up from the earth, as head-hair (*kesha*) and body-hair (*loman*) [grows] from a living person—so from the Imperishable (*akshara*) arises here the world.

This view is given explicit expression in the *Brihad-Âranyaka-Upanishad* (2.5.18):

. . . There is nothing that is not covered by him [i.e. the Supreme Person], nothing that is not pervaded by him.

*Brahman* is the source and persistent substratum of everything there is. It is omnipresent in all temporal things. It is the Whole that comprises both transcendence and immanence (see *Brihad-Âranyaka-Upanishad* 5.2.1). It is greater than the world (see *Chândogya-Upanishad* 3.11.6). All creatures are said to be merely one fourth of the Supreme Person (see *Chândogya-Upanishad* 3.13.6), whilst its other three-quarters are immortal. It is *sat* and *tyat*, or the existent and the beyond (see *Taittirîya-Upanishad* 2.6.1.). It is both the undifferentiated (*avyakirta*) (see *Brihad-Âranyaka-Upanishad* 1.4.7) and the universe differentiated by name and form.

*Brahman* with form, or the sensory world arising out of the formless ground, is also referred to as *âtmâ vaishvanarâhor* “mundane Self” in the *Chândogya-Upanishad* (5.12.ff.). The sky is said to be its head (5.12.2), the sun its eye (5.13.2), air its life force (5.14.2), space its body (5.15.2), water its bladder (5.16.2) and earth its feet (5.17.2).

What is implied in all these archaic cosmogonies is the self-division or self-multiplication of the Absolute. The one homogeneous Reality “visualized”—the word *aikshata* is customarily translated with “it thought” but the choice of words is surely not accidental and without deeper meaning—“May I be many” (*bahu syâm*, see *Chândogya-Upanishad* 6.2.3). This is repeated *verbatim* in the *Taittirîya-Upanishad* (2.6.1). This concept of self-duplication is also expressed in terms of self-sacrifice, as for instance in the *Brihad-Âranyaka-Upanishad* (1.1) where the process of world creation is likened to the old-established horse sacrifice (*ashva-medha*). The Creator’s cosmic self-sacrifice serves as a model for all sacrifices on the human level.

But to return to the question of the reality or illusoriness of the created universe: The clearest exposition of this principal tenet of the *Upanishads* is by Uddâlaka Aruni, in whom the German indologist Walter Ruben saw the *Urahn* (original ancestor) of the Sâmkhya tradition, because he was the first to formulate the doctrine of causation peculiar to all Sâmkhya traditions.\*4 The following words are ascribed to him (see *Brihad-Âranyaka-Upanishad* 6.4-6):

Just as, my friend, all that is made of earth should be known by a single lump of earth, the modification ( *vikâra*) being a [mere] name based on language, [whilst] it is just earth in truth.

Just as, my friend, all that is made of gold should be known by a single nugget of gold. . .  
Just as, my friend, all that is made of iron should be known by a single pair of nail scissors. . .

Although the various modifications (*vikâra*) of the same primary 'substance' are declared to be based on linguistic convention (*vâcâ-ârambhana*), this does not imply that the universe is a purely mental construct without any actual existence outside the mind. On the contrary the implicit assumption is always that the real gives birth to the real. This is the most blatant refutation of *mâyâ-vâda*. One can safely affirm that the concept of *mâyâ* in the sense of "illusoriness" is foreign to the older *Upanishads*. Uddâlaka's dictum that all things 'have Being as their root, Being as their abode, Being as their support' (*Chândogya-Upanishad* 6.8.6) is shared by all Upanishadic thinkers of the older generation of which we have knowledge.

This basic contention is also accepted by Yâjñavalkya whom Ruben styled an "idealist." Although there is admittedly a difference in approach to Uddâlaka, we must regard this as a result of the distinct intellectual temperament of these two great thinkers. Uddâlaka is inclined to define *brahman* more in terms of its world immanence, whereas Yâjñavalkya, who is actually the more impressive of the two, tends toward a negativistic approach; he refuses to describe the Absolute, as his standard phrase in reply to all kinds of positive attributions indicates: *neti, neti* or "not thus, not thus." However, neither thinker denies the existence of the world and the appellations "idealist" or "realist" seem arbitrary.

*Brahman* and world are of the same ontological status in that both are equally real, but they differ profoundly in their metaphysical significance. *Brahman* ranks highest in the hierarchy of values. It alone is the supreme value; all else is *arta* or "fallen" or "afflicted." Hence human beings are exhorted to strive for the realization of this ultimate good.

In the older prose *Upanishads*, *brahman* is understood as an impersonal force that creates, sustains, and (in the role of *antaryamin* or "innate controllers") mysteriously guides and impels human beings as it does the course of the rivers, luminaries, and the seasons (see *Brihad-Âranyaka-Upanishad* 2.8.9). This view changes with the metric *Upanishads*, such as the *Katha*, *Mundaka*, and *Shvetâshvatara*, which introduce the personal aspect: *brahman* as God or Lord (*îsha*). The *Kena-Upanishad* is positioned between both viewpoints, as is evident from its introductory stanza:

By whom (*kena*) willed and directed does the mind light on its objects? By whom commanded does life the first, move? At whose will do [people] utter this speech? And what god is it who prompts the eye and the ear?

A similar transitional position is occupied by the *Īsha-Upanishad*, according to which the Supreme Being is intrinsic and extrinsic to everything (stanza 5):

It moves and it moves not; it is far and it is near.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan remarks on this:

These apparently contradictory statements are not suggestive of the mental unbalance of the writer. He is struggling to describe what he experiences through the limitations of human thought and language. The Supreme is beyond the categories of thought . . . It is all that is in time and yet is beyond time.\*5

A further progression toward a theistic conception of the Ultimate Reality can be seen in the *Katha-Upanishad*. It speaks of the Self as the lord-of-the-chariot (*rathin*) seated in the chariot (*ratha*), which is the body. The wisdom-faculty (*buddhi*) is the charioteer, the mind (*manas*) the reins (see *Katha-Upanishad* 1.3.3). The senses (*indriya*) are the horses, the sense objects (*vishaya*) the paths (see 1.3.4). *Brahman* is the lord of what has been and what will be (*īshanam bhūta-bhavyasya*, 2.1.5). It is the “one controller” (*eko vashī*, 2.2.12), a phrase that is repeated in the *Shvetâshvatara-Upanishad* (6.12).

Very significant are the words *yo vidadhâti kâ mân*, “who fulfills the desires [of many]” (2.2.13). This is corroborated by another stanza in which the Self is depicted as “shaping desire after desire” (*kâ mam kâ mam purusho nirmimâ nah*, 2.2.8). This refers to its function as impeller, without which the worlds would atrophy. The cosmic events are not a pre-set mechanical process, but they are sustained and continuously guided by the inscrutable will of God.

Out of fear of him, fire burns.  
Out of fear, the sun burns. . . (2.3.3).

The universe is contingent on the Supreme Being. As an emanation of the Divine it has no autonomy but derives its teleology entirely from God.

This brings us to the *Shvetâshvatara-Upanishad*, which is the culmination of the theistic current in the *Upanishads*. The secret doctrine of the *Shvetâshvatara-Upanishad* is prefaced by a review and simultaneous refutation of various doctrines, current in ancient India, about the nature of *brahman*. Eight such theories are mentioned:

- (1) *kâ la* —time
- (2) *svabhâ va*—entelechy
- (3) *niyati*—destiny
- (4) *yadricchâ*—coincidence
- (5) *bhûtâ ni*—material elements
- (5) *yoni*—primal source (= *prakriti*)
- (6) *purusha*—transcendental subject
- (7) *samyoga eshâm*—a combination of the above

None of these proposed causes is considered sufficient. The author of the *Shvetâshvatara-Upanishad* comes forward with his own doctrine of the “creative-power innate in the Divine” (*deva-âtma-shakti*), “hidden in its own qualities” (*sva-gunair nigûdhâm*). By “qualities” are meant either the three *gunas* of Sâmkhya ontology (referred to in 5.7), or, as Shankara suggests, the trinity of world-ground (*prakriti*), soul-ground (*purusha*) and Lord (*îshvara*).

The Divine is regarded as the creative matrix of everything, and at the same time as the Wholly Other:

He envelops the world on all sides and stands ten fingers' breadth beyond. (3.14)

He is the stimulator (*savitri*, 2.1), ruler (*îshana*, 3.11), the lord (*prabhu*, 3.11), omnipresent (*sarva-gata*, 3.11) and one only (3.2; 4.1). It is said of him that he is

. . . the One who spreads the net, who rules with his ruling, who rules all the world with his ruling (*îshata îshanibhih*). (3.1)

He is the all-maker, the all-knower, self-originated, the author of time, the possessor-of-the-specifications (*gunin*), the knower of everything, the ruler of the world-ground and the field-knower (i.e., the Self), the lord of the primary-constituents (*guna*), the cause of phenomenal existence (*samsâra*), of emancipation, continuance (*sthiti*) and bondage (see 6.16). He is Hara (1.10), Rudra (3.2) or Shiva (3.11)—and no longer the impersonal force of the older *Upanishads*. He can be addressed in prayer (see 3.5-6), and it is possible to establish a personal relation with him:

May He endow us with auspicious understanding (*sa no buddhyâ subhayâ samyunaktu*, 4.1).

In *Shvetâshvatara-Upanishad* 3.20, the doctrine of grace (*prasâda*) is for the first time clearly enunciated.\*6 Shankara, the arch- nondualist, tried to explain away the obvious meaning of *dhâtuh prasâdât* (“through the grace of the creator”) by reconstructing the Sanskrit text to *dhâtu-prasâdât* (“through the tranquility of the senses”). However, this amendment is both unnecessary and unjustified. Nowhere does this become more evident than in the concluding verse (6.23), which epitomizes the spirit of the *Shvetâshvatara-Upanishad* beautifully when it admonishes the initiate to cultivate “supreme love” (*para-bhakti*) for God. This is in fact the first occurrence of the term *bhakti* in the *Upanishads*. Grace and devotion to God are interrelated and together replace the earlier meditation on the impersonal *brahman*.

The theism of the *Shvetâshvatara-Upanishad* comes to full bloom in the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* which, if we can believe the colophon, is actually an *Upanishad* pertaining to the tradition of Vaishnavism (the God-man Krishna featured in the *Gita* being an incarnation of Vishnu). Now the way was paved for the great religious movements of medieval Hinduism and their various theological and cosmogonic models.

## Notes

1. There is an interesting passage in the *Taittirîya-Upanishad* (2.6.1) where it is said that those who know *brahman* as unreal (*asat*) become themselves unreal, whereas those

who know it as real (*sat*) become themselves real. The implied meaning seems to be that the mind leads either to emancipation or to bondage according to where attaches itself.

2. P. Deussen and G. A. Jacob, *The Philosophy of the Vedanta and the Vedantasara* (Calcutta, 1957), p. 11.

3. op. cit., p. 13.

4. See W. Ruben, *Die Philosophen der Upanischaden* (Bern, 1947), pp. 156ff.

5. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanisads* (London, 1953), p. 571.

6. See also 4.21 and cf. *Katha-Upanishad* 2.1.23.

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