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F054

## **BRAHMAN**

The Sanskrit word *brahman* (neuter) emerged in late Vedic literature and Upaniṣads (900-300 BC) as the name (never pluralized) of the divine reality pervading the universe, knowledge or experience of which is a person's supreme good. The word's earliest usage (often pluralized) is to refer to the verses of the oldest work in Sanskrit (and in any Indo-European language), the *Rg Veda* (c. 1200 BC), which is a compilation of poems and hymns to Indo-European gods. The individual verses of the poems are mantras (*brahmāṇi*), whose proper enunciation in the course of ritual and sacrifice was thought to secure various aims. Thematically, the *Rg Veda* and other early Indian literature present a sense of pervasive divinity. Apparently, through an assimilation of the idea of the magic of mantras to the divine immanence theme the word *brahman* assumed its later meaning. In any case, Brahman — the Absolute, the supremely real — became the focus of Indian spirituality and the center of much metaphysics, for almost three thousand years, down to the present day.

In the Upaniṣads, which are mystic treatises containing speculation about Brahman's nature and relation to ourselves and the world, the central positions of Vedānta schools emerge, all of which are philosophies of Brahman (see VEDĀNTA). But not even in the narrow set of the earliest and most universally accepted Upaniṣads (numbering 12 or 13) is there expressed a consistent worldview. Important themes about Brahman may be identified, but there is no overall unity of conception, despite what later exegetes claim. The unity of the early Upaniṣads concerns the premier importance of mystical knowledge or awareness of Brahman (*brahma-vidyā*), not precisely what it is that is to be mystically known.

The classical Indian philosophic schools of Vedānta systemized the thought of early Upaniṣads. These schools divide broadly into the psychological monism of Advaita Vedānta and theistic views of Brahman championed by non-Advaitins. According to Advaita, the central Upaniṣadic teaching is that Brahman is the self. The world, and God, are illusions of false consciousness. According to Indian theism, in contrast, Brahman is God, the real creator of a real universe. Despite this opposition, concessions regarding Brahman can be discerned in each camp.

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### **1 The Vedas and Vedic Literature**

The poems of the *Rg Veda*, most but not all of which address gods of an Indo-European pantheon, were transmitted until modern times through the care of a priestly caste. A Vedic (later, Hindu) priest is known as a *brāhmaṇa* or even *brahman* (masculine, accent on the final syllable, as opposed to *brahman*, neuter, accent on the first syllable). The apparent

etymological connection between the word for the Absolute and that for the caste has provoked no little consternation and speculation in a sociological vein among modern scholars. The solution to the mystery appears to lie in the shamanic role of the poet *cum* priest in early Indo-European society. According to Vedic scholars, the poems of the *R̥g Veda* seem the results of competitions in eloquence among ‘seers’ (*kavi*-s) or shamans over generations, each poem conceived as inspired by a shaman’s sense of ‘occult correspondences between the sacred and profane’ (L. Renou). As Vedic society became more settled in its practices, rituals and sacrifices became fixed with shamans assuming the offices of priests and keepers (i.e. memorizers) of the sacred hymns. Original composition ceased, and the *R̥g* and three other Vedas assumed their canonical forms. Individual verses of the poems, referred to in the Vedas themselves as *brahman* (neuter), became central to ritual performances, and the importance of the overall content — stories of the gods, identifications of correspondences among spheres of life, etc. — waned. The verses, known as mantras, were considered invested with magical power.

Vedic themes were not forgotten, however. Throughout the *R̥g Veda*, a sense of pervasive divinity is expressed. Gods correspond to, or inhere in, natural forces, and there is a divine structure and rhythm to the universe as a whole. Moreover, although the gods hymned are plural, when addressed each is said to be supreme. At places, e.g., *R̥g Veda* 1.164.46, a kind of monotheism is evident: ‘They have styled Him Indra (the Chief of the gods), Mītra (the Friend), Varuṇa (the Venerable), Agni (Fire), also the celestial, great-winged Garutmā; for although one, poets speak of Him diversely; they say Agni, Yama (Death), and Mātariśvan (Lord of breath).’ The verse has been interpreted as an early expression of Indian henotheism: one God, i.e. Brahman, takes various divine forms, and is worshiped in various forms by people according to personal proclivities. Thematically, the Vedas express a multifarious divinity and unitive spirituality important to most subsequent Indian religion.

In later Vedic literature — prose appendages called *bhāhmana* and *āranyaka* — the supreme force moving the gods and operative throughout the universe is designated for the first time *brahman* (neuter). The term conveys a sense of mystery, and distinct proposals are made about just what Brahman is (e.g., wind, breath, the sun). Brahman is said to be *svayam-bhū*, ‘self-existent,’ and is identified with Prajāpati, ‘Father of Creatures.’ The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (c. 900 BC) declares at 10.2.3: ‘In the beginning this universe was just Brahman; Brahman created these gods.’

## 2 Upaniṣads

Early Upaniṣads (from 800 to 300 BC) represent a break with the ritualism of later Vedic literature, and speculation about Brahman becomes decidedly more pronounced. Debates on metaphysical topics called *brahmôdya*, ‘discourses on Brahman,’ held in the courts of kings and princes, are recorded. (A *brahmôdya* was apparently only a riddle contest in the earlier period.) In particular, the reasonings of the ‘Brahman-knower’ Yājñavalkya against various opponents in the court of King Janaka, as reported in the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (c. 800 BC), may be taken to usher in a new era of Indian thought, marked by abstraction and self-conscious argument.

However, the early Upaniṣads present at best variations on central views. No single coherent worldview is expressed but rather arguments and proposals centered on Brahman and Brahman’s relation to ourselves and the universe. Despite what later exegetes claim, there is no unity of theory. Later proponents of Upaniṣadic philosophies (called Vedāntins)

look for an overall unity because they view the Upaniṣads as revealed texts.

Many Upaniṣadic passages are exploratory, playfully spinning stories with rather abstruse morales, or etymologies, usually false, of words with psychological meanings. Brahman is usually approached psychologically; the early Upaniṣads are predominantly mystical texts. The self as known in meditation is the medium for knowing the Absolute, the self's mysterious ground, which turns out to be the ground of the entire universe. As though announcing a discovery, some Upaniṣads proclaim the identity of the self and Brahman. Several rich psychological conceptions are worked out and asserted with a tone of confidence that contrasts with the tentativeness of statements about Brahman.

Nevertheless, there are at least ten themes about Brahman that reverberate both throughout early Upaniṣads themselves and later Vedāntic philosophy.

- (1) Brahman is self (*ātman*) and consciousness.
- (2) Brahman is world ground.
- (3) Brahman is transcendent of 'names and forms' (*nāma-rūpa*), i.e. transcendent of finite individuality.
- (4) Brahman is unitary, the coincidence of opposites, and omnipresent.
- (5) Brahman has 'non-dual' (*advaita*) self-awareness.
- (6) Brahman is the essence or finest part of everything.
- (7) Brahman is the locus of value, with awareness of Brahman as the 'supreme personal good' (*parama-puruṣārtha*) and 'liberation' (*mukti*) from fear and evil.
- (8) Brahman is mystically discoverable.
- (9) Brahman is beyond the power of thought.
- (10) Brahman is the creator and inner controller of all things.

It would be difficult, if not strictly impossible, to read the Upaniṣads uninfluenced by the centuries of later commentary and interpretation. The great intra-camp debate among classical Vedāntins concerns the question of the theism of early Upaniṣads, or, more broadly, how Brahman relates to the world. The theistic interpretation — of Brahman as God creating a world of real particulars — is eschewed by the Advaita (Non-Dualist) school. Theistic Vedāntins cite Upaniṣadic passages stating that Brahman is determinant of individual names and forms, *nāma-rūpa*. In their view, Brahman is a primordial Will and Controller — i.e. 'God,' *īśvara*. The dispute is irresolvable in the Upaniṣads themselves. Theme 10 is as pronounced as any, textually speaking. But Advaitin exegetes find a way of subordinating it to other themes. Conversely, Vedāntic theists interpret Upaniṣadic monism as underscoring their understanding of creation as emanation. Brahman as God looses forth (or manifests, *srjate*) the world out of God's own substance, as a spider's web is spun out of its own body.

The Advaita interpretation emphasizes themes 4 and 5, the unity and self-awareness of Brahman. At *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 4.1.7, Yājñavalkya says, 'With only an awareness of *ātman*, self, should one meditate, for here [in the self] all these things become one.' The prominence of monism here — a spiritual monism in accordance with the idea (theme 1) that Brahman is self or consciousness — provides grounds for interpreting individuality ('names and forms') as *mere* names and forms, as Advaita would do. The logic of the reasoning is not complex: if there is just one thing, how then can there be many?

Moreover, in other Upaniṣadic passages Brahman is explained through an analogy to dreaming, an analogy that fuels an Advaita assimilation of the theistic doctrine of creation to the idea of the One. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 4.3.9-10: '[Sleeping,] one takes along the stuff of this all-embracing universe [and] tears it apart himself [and] shapes it himself . . . He is the all-maker, for he is the maker of everything.' Advaitins understand the 'He' as Brahman identical with the soul, *ātman*, who enjoys various states of himself — specifically, waking,

dreaming and a state transcending both where the soul is 'aware only of its own light' (cf. *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*). In the dream state, emanationism seems valid, and waking, says the Upaniṣad, is like dreaming. But states involving awareness of objects other than the self are expressly declared to be less valuable than self-illumination. Thus a subordination of theist emanationist cosmology to an illusionism about diversity seems to be called for, too: this is the Advaita reading.

Vedāntic theists, for their part, propose a stratified view of reality, of Brahman, ranging from an essential Divine to material things. Passages such as *Taittirīya* 2.1ff with its theory of five sheaths progressively manifesting an essential soul and *Chāndogya* 6.8.7ff with its proclamations (theme 6) that Brahman is an indwelling essence can be read as supporting the stratified reading: there is an essential Brahman, both transcendent and indwelling the heart of everything, who progressively manifests in this world. Physical things may be the furthest from what God is in God's own nature, but, as *Taittirīya* 3.1.2 says, 'matter [too] is Brahman.' Perhaps the most significant theistic passage comes from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (3.7.1-23): 'He who dwelling in the earth is other than the earth, whom the earth does not know, whose body the earth is, who controls the earth from within — is the Self, the Inner Controller, the Immortal' (Verse 3, a refrain repeated with substitutions). Finally, the Sanskrit word for God, *īśvara* and cognates (such as *īś*) appear in early Upanishads dozens of times as apparent synonyms of *brahman*.

### Advaita Vedānta

Developments in thought about Brahman continue long past the early Upaniṣads through such modern philosophers as Aurobindo and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. Most contributions occur under the banner of the Advaita Vedānta school or a confederation of Indian theists. Speculation about Brahman as Speech (*śabda-brahman*) also occurs, but will not be treated here (see BHARTRHARI). Both Advaita and Indian theism are intellectually long and complex movements (see VEDĀNTA), and we shall confine ourselves exclusively to the thought about Brahman and there the most significant developments.

Advaitins devote special attention to Brahman's nature and how it is possible for us to conceive of that nature, on the one hand, and about the relation, or non-relation, of Brahman to the world, on the other. In the first case, the concern is principally to shore up a sense of the value of liberation. In the second, it is to defend a view of Brahman as an absolute unity admitting no differentiation whatsoever.

Advaitin thought about Brahman's nature appears to be soteriologically motivated; that is to say, a view of experience, or realization, of oneself as Brahman, considered the supreme goal of life, dictates the direction of Advaita elaborations. Classical Advaita also asserts that nothing positive can be predicated of Brahman (themes 3 and 9), since positive characterization is confined to differentiating finite things. But inasmuch as this view stands in tension with elaborations of Brahman's nature, it is usually conveniently ignored or muted through speculation, not very successful, about the power of metaphor and indirect indication (*upalakṣaṇa*). The soteriological need is overriding — with many at least.

A stock characterization of Brahman as *saccidānanda* emerges at the center of this project: Brahman as existent or existence (*sat*), as awareness (*cit*), and as bliss (*ānanda*: the compound *saccidānanda* is formed by euphonic combination). Brahman is in fact said to be the sole existent, the single reality; the sole consciousness, a single self of everyone; and a supreme bliss. Who wouldn't want to realize this?

There is controversy in particular concerning how Brahman is bliss. Some insist that

this is said only to indicate that Brahman is not subject to the hedonic content of our normal experience; others that this underscores the supreme value of personal realization of Brahman. In either case, a soteriological context is key. The spirit of the elaboration is not to spell out how Brahman underpins our everyday experience, how Brahman as existent underlies the existence of everything, how Brahman as conscious, et cetera. Advaitins when confronted with such interpretation typically retreat to their stance about metaphor and indirect indication, though some do say that in particular the bliss of Brahman is (distantly) reflected in our finest moments of worldly pleasure and happiness.

Exegetically, conflict with theistic Vedāntins seems to have inspired the notion of *nirguṇa* contrasting with *saṅguṇa brahman*, Brahman as ‘without’ and ‘with qualities,’ though the distinction also dovetails with the Advaita type of negative theology. Brahman-without-qualities is supremely real; Brahman-with-qualities is talked about in scripture as a concession to obtuse minds. Scripture is like a patient teacher (*guru*), and it is difficult to appreciate that Brahman as supremely real has no qualities. Scripture talks about God, i.e. Brahman-with-qualities, as a preparatory to the austere truth.

Advaitins face obvious difficulties in upholding the view that Brahman is an absolute unity admitting no differentiation. Since Brahman is the only reality, diversity has to be illusory. But how can what is illusory even appear? And how did our spiritual ignorance — or awareness of diversity (and not of Brahman) — originate? How could it possibly originate, given that Brahman, as understood by Advaita, is the sole reality? Much reflection is devoted throughout the long history of Advaita to everyday perceptual illusion, since this is the analogy used for Brahman’s relation, or non-relation, to the world. One Advaita camp also maintains that the world of appearance has structure, that it can be studied and explained in its own terms, though not in relation to Brahman, which is a reality of an entirely different order. Another, dialectical camp eschews such a two-tiered view, arguing that the reality of Brahman means that no sense can be made of appearance of diversity even in its own terms. This camp presents a barrage of arguments against all known pluralist ontologies, particularly that of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika (see MONISM, INDIAN).

### **Post-Upaniṣadic Indian Theism**

The understanding of Brahman as God — the Creator and Sustainer of the universe as both its stuff and a will that fundamentally shapes things — is developed in devotional texts of popular religion — for example, the *Bhagavad Gītā* (‘Song of God’, c. 200 BC ?) — as well as in polemical treatises of theistic philosophers. The philosophers are much occupied with explaining precisely how the individual soul is distinct from Brahman, along with the sense, if any, in which the two may be said to be identical. Rāmānuja (c. 1120) works an analogy between a substance as quality-bearer and the qualities it bears: God bears souls as accidental qualities, and is the necessary support of their appearance. Other theists use other metaphors; that of the ocean (God) and waves (souls) is common. The question is shaped by the controversy with Advaita and the Advaita insistence that the soul and Brahman are one.

Theistic philosophers also tend to stress God’s love for the soul, teaching, in accord with the *Gītā*, that the best way to mystical knowledge of Brahman is not meditation nor asceticism (associated with Advaita, Yoga, and Buddhism) but rather a corresponding *bhakti*, or love of God. The whole world is God’s play (*līlā*), say theistic Vedāntins; and through love of God and worship and devotion, we are eventually to realize this and find in every experience the embrace of the Divine. Indian theists from the classical age into the modern conceive of a supreme personal good as a spiritual act of love-making.

The *Gītā* uses a Vedic motif, developed by later theists, to explain the process of emanation: sacrifice. Brahman sacrifices its infinity in becoming finite but thereby creates the world. Several theists trace a process of contraction through gods and goddesses and earthly *avatāra*-s — or special incarnations of God — through humans and animals down to rocks and dust. Through sacrifice Brahman emanates the world as its body. The *Gītā* teaches that through a reverse sacrifice of offering of the finite, a soul finds Brahman transcendent, the supreme good.

See also: GOD, INDIAN CONCEPTIONS OF; MONISM, INDIAN and VEDĀNTA.



### References and further reading

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Warrier, A. G. Krishna (1977) *God in Advaita*. Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study. (Shows that Śāṅkara, the great Advaitin, takes seriously the Upaniṣadic teaching of *saguṇa brahman*, i.e. God.)

