

1.1. The Upaniṣads

Sanskrit-speaking tribes began invading the Indian subcontinent from the northwest as early as 1500 BCE; Sanskrit verses known as the Veda—“Revealed Knowledge”—composed over centuries, came to be regarded by them as sacred. The four Vedas are the oldest documents in Sanskrit (theirs is an archaic, pre-classical Sanskrit).

Vedic poems and hymns express various themes, some of which are philosophic and important to the speculation of later periods. But the Upaniṣads, the “secret doctrines” of the ancient culture, are what decisively launched Indian philosophy—especially Indian idealism. Early Upaniṣads (from 800 to 300 BCE) represent a break with previous literature in the freeing of an abstract intellect from myth and ritual. Prose appears, and the poetry is usually discursive, didactic, and less imagistic than that of the Veda. Though argument and elaborations of positions are not nearly as pronounced and professionalized as in later periods, even the earliest Upaniṣads employ self-conscious argumentation. They contain several reports of debates on metaphysical topics held in the courts of kings. In particular, with the depictions of the sage Yājñavalkya and King Janaka in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, important idealist arguments about an Absolute—called Brahman—find articulation at an early date (c. 800 BCE).

However, early Upaniṣads are above all mystical texts: they report mystical experiences. They are also commonly regarded—in later times—as revelation. Views about their nature as revelation vary, but their champions, known as Vedāntins (Śrīharṣa is a Vedāntin), concur that a mystical awareness of Brahman, *brahma-vidyā*, is the core teaching concerning human destiny and a “supreme personal good,” *parama-puruṣārtha*. The monistic idealism at the bottom of Śrīharṣa’s perspective grows out of this notion, as will become clear.

While we will focus on Upaniṣadic themes most evident in the philosophy of Śrīharṣa, it should be kept in mind that early Upaniṣads present variations on central views; there are elaborations in one direction or another, as well as contradictory claims. Some passages are indeed idealist, but some are not; some are theistic, some not; some ritualist, some anti-ritualist, et cetera. There is at best a unity of tone, which is decidedly sonorous and authoritative (a voice of thunder). Despite what later exegetes claim, no unity of theory obtains in the twelve or thirteen most commonly recognized early Upaniṣadic texts. Classical Vedāntins look for an overall unity because they view the texts as revealed truth. Nevertheless, there are recurrent themes: most importantly, each early Upaniṣad attempts to specify a mystical reality of consciousness or “self” (*ātman*), and these efforts are key to the views of Śrīharṣa, who, I repeat, like all classical Vedāntins, takes his basic positions to derive from Upaniṣadic authority.

There are nine Upaniṣadic themes that are important for an appreciation of Śrīharṣa’s Vedānta. All concern Brahman, the Absolute, the Real.

1. Brahman is self (*ātman*) and consciousness.¹
2. Brahman is world ground.²
3. Brahman is transcendent of “names and forms” (*nāma-rūpa*), i.e., is transcendent of finite individuality.³
4. Brahman is unitary, the coincidence of opposites, and omnipresent.⁴
5. Brahman has “non-dual” (*advaita*) self-awareness.⁵

6. Brahman is the essence or finest part of everything.⁶
7. Brahman is the locus of value, and awareness of Brahman is the “supreme personal good” (*parama-puruṣārtha*) and “liberation” (*mukti*) from fear and evil.⁷
8. Brahman is mystically discoverable.⁸
9. Brahman is beyond the power of thought uninformed by mystical awareness.⁹

These themes are present in Śrīharṣa, who inherits them through a more than millennium-long commentarial and philosophic tradition, Vedānta.

The great intra-camp debate among classical Vedāntins concerns the question of the theism of the early Upaniṣads, or, more broadly, how the Absolute relates to the world. The theistic interpretation—of Brahman as God creating a world of real particulars—had, by Śrīharṣa’s time, become eschewed by his 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—“God,” *īśvara*.¹⁰ Advaitins apparently saw the theistic statements as incompatible with their theory of Brahman’s transcendence and unitary consciousness, and they developed exegetical strategies to reinterpret the troublesome texts.

Now a brief digression concerning the theism of Śrīharṣa’s realist opponents. Except in the earliest realist texts,¹¹ philosophers of the sister schools of Logic (Nyāya) and Atomism (Vaiśeṣika) uphold a view of God that, even though it finds God’s creative activity limited, circumscribed by a variety of factors, has much in common with theistic Vedānta. Over time—particularly in the New Logic period—these theisms come closer together, generally speaking. However, not only does the Logicians’ “God” seem diminished from the Vedāntic perspective, Logicians favor rational considerations in support of their theism, not proclamations of the Upaniṣads: Naiyāyikas are the great rational theologians in the Indian context. They are not usually considered Vedāntins, then, because it is not the Upaniṣads, i.e., not scripture, but certain arguments that they take to ground their theistic views. On the other hand, Śaṅkara Mīśra (c. 1430), a New Logician who writes a book answering Śrīharṣa (portions of which are translated in chapter 5), considers himself an Upaniṣadic theist, citing even controversial Upaniṣadic texts in support of his non-Advaitic views.¹²

This book is not the place to air exegetical disputes. For our purposes, it is sufficient to review a few Upaniṣadic passages that support the Advaita reading. This is a reading emphasizing the nine themes presented above, in particular themes 4 and 5, of the unity and self-awareness of Brahman. These Upaniṣadic ideas are developed into Advaita monism. Brahman’s unity comes to be taken to mean that appearances of individualities (“names and forms”) are illusory, unreal.

An incipient Advaita monism is indeed evident in what is probably the earliest Upaniṣad, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*:

They do not see him, for (then he would be) not whole. Breath is just this one breathing; sight (this one) seeing; hearing (his) hearing; thinking (his) thinking. All these things here are just names of his acts. Thus one who worships (or meditates on—*upāste*) one or the other of these knows not, for as he is not whole he comes to be one or the other of these. With only the idea “*ātman*,” “self,” should one meditate, for here (in the self) all these things become one.¹³

The prominence of the monistic idea here—a “spiritual” monism in

accordance with the idea (theme 1) that Brahman is self or consciousness—provides ground for interpreting individuality (the Upaniṣadic expression for individuality is *nāma-rūpa*, “names and forms”) as *mere* names and forms, as the Advaita school would do. The logic of the reasoning is not complex: if there is just one thing, then how can there also be many?¹⁴

There is no Upaniṣadic passage where such illusionism (*māyā-vāda*) is more pronounced than in a portion of the Yājñavalkya-Janaka discourse that constitutes the third and fourth *brāhmaṇas* of the fourth chapter of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. At the core of this extremely important passage is an elaborate discussion of dream.¹⁵ The text includes several monistic proclamations boldly applied to world appearance, for example, “*na iha nānā asti kiṃcana*,” “There is here no diversity whatsoever.”¹⁶ Here also is the proclamation probably most often quoted by Advaitins, “*neti neti*” (“[Brahman is] not thus, not thus”).¹⁷ This statement underscores themes 3 and 9, the transcendence and inconceivability of Brahman. The Yājñavalkya-Janaka passage also contains summary statements of core psychological doctrines. Finally, crucial to the alternative, theistic interpretation of the Upaniṣads is an emanationist/creationist view: God manifests, or spins out, finite material forms out of God’s own self, like a spider its web. But in this passage the Advaitins find a tool for subordinating the emanationist story to their idea of the One.

Yājñavalkya, in the Upaniṣad, is described as *brahmavid*, a “Brahman-knower.” Speaking to King Janaka in a public contest of wisdom (where he vanquishes all comers), Yājñavalkya puts forth the Brahman conception with reference to states of the self: “(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.”¹⁸ “He” is the self, *ātman*, who enjoys various states of himself, characterized specifically as waking, dreaming, and a state transcending both, where the self is “aware only of its own light” (*svayaṃ jyotiḥ*).

“An ocean, a single seer without duality becomes he whose world is *brahman*, O King,” Yājñavalkya instructed. “This is his supreme way. This is his supreme achievement. This is his supreme world. This is his supreme bliss. Other beings live on just a small portion of this bliss.”¹⁹

Thus a state of self-illumination is exalted over the waking and dream states. The dream state is where theistic emanationism and creationism have their validity. The waking state is like that of dream. Crucially, these two states involving awareness of objects other than the self are said to be less valuable than the state of self-illumination. Thus a subordination of the theist emanationist/creationist cosmology to a view of diversity as illusion seems to be called for, too: this is the Advaita reading. The idea that Brahman is one is given special psychological and axiological meaning: the state where the self knows only itself is the state that is most valuable.

Classical Advaitins draw an analogy to perceptual illusion to explain Brahman’s relation to the world. But that analogy is not found in the early Upaniṣads; rather, a dream analogy is presented.²⁰ For classical Advaita, the point of the dream analogy is, first, idealism—the reality of the dream is dependent on the dreamer—and, second, illusionism—the dream misrepresents reality.