

BRAHMAN AS THE PRINCIPLE OF INTERCONNECTEDNESS: THE GROUND OF THE ETHICAL TEACHINGS OF THE UPANIṢADS

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Abstract

This paper seeks to offer a logical answer to the question: 'Why should we be moral?' The answer is derived from the philosophy of Interconnectedness as expounded in the ethics of the Upaniṣads. It also highlights how this theory can be practised in our daily lives by following some ethical codes of conduct as suggested in the Upaniṣads.

Keywords: *Upaniṣads, Upaniṣadic Ethics, Brahman, Ātman, interconnectedness, unity*

We often find that when children play, they create their own world. The curious part is that while dwelling in that imaginary world, they forget everything about their reality or real world. Now, if the mother asks in between, 'Children, have you noticed the time?' they can't grasp it immediately since they are so engrossed and lost in their own world. Mother understands and gives them a call, 'It is time to go to school, now get up. Stop playing.' Isn't it the same with us? Haven't we lost sight of truth or reality while battling with each other daily? If we have, in that case, what is the truth and how can we follow it? In this paper, following the ethics of the *Upaniṣads*, we will try to find the answer to these intriguing questions.

Human existence is unavoidably inseparable from ethics. In our day-to-day lives, we make moral decisions. We choose between right and wrong, just and unjust, good and evil, which are called moral values. It will be easy for us to make this choice if we have a clear standard or criterion of morality. But, before proceeding, we need to have a clear understanding of the concepts like 'ethics' (*nītiśāstra*), 'morality' (*naitikatā*) and 'values' (*mūlyavodha*). In Indian philosophy these concepts are interconnected with one another. The Sanskrit term for morality is '*naitikatā*', which comes from the term '*nīti*' [*ni + tin (suffix)*], meaning that which takes us to the right path –

“niyante iti nyāya vā nīti”

The human values (*mūlyavodha*) like justice, forgiveness, kindness, etc. take us to a destination. They are like the milestones in the long path of morality. Ethics or *nītiśāstra* is the treatise that determines what is moral and what is not.

The ethics of the Upaniṣads are not otherwise. But there is an important point of difference between Western ethics and that of the Upaniṣads. Modern ethical theories are mainly divided into two broad categories: deontological and teleological. According to Deontological theory, actions are intrinsically right or wrong, regardless of the consequences that they produce. Immanuel Kant holds that one's moral duty is simple and singular – to follow the moral law expressed in the categorical imperative – to always act according to a maxim that is simultaneously valid as a universal moral law. But I can't agree with Kant on this point, since, we find that the moral bent of an individual, and that of a community, is mainly shaped by its culture. An action (e.g. widow remarriage) that is worthy of universalization to one culture may be opposed in another culture.

Teleological ethics, on the other hand, is of the view that actions are not intrinsically right or wrong. But the rightness of actions or their moral value depends on the ends they bring about. Jeremy Bentham, one of the important utilitarianists, holds:

*'It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong.'*¹

The *Upaniṣadic* ethics has a tinge of teleological ethics, no doubt. But while addressing the problem: 'What is the measure of right and wrong?', it proves to be more comprehensive and logical in nature. The *Upaniṣads* are usually associated with specific ideas of spirituality. That the *Upaniṣads* made important contributions to ethics is known to very few people. For the first time, it was Swami Vivekananda who brought the *Upaniṣadic* ethics to the fore. According to Vivekananda:

*'Ethics is unity, its basis is love. It will not look at variation. The one aim of ethics is this unity, this sameness.'*²

So, the action which leads to that unity is right, from the *Upaniṣadic* perspective. And that which leads to division is wrong. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad substantiates this truth in the following verse:

'Sarvaṁ khalvidaṁ brahman' [3.14.1]

Everything is the manifestation of one and the same *Brahman*.

¹ Roth, John K. *Ethics Revised Edition*, p. 1531. INC. Pasadena, California Hackensack, New Jersey: Salem Press, 2005.

² Vivekananda, Swami. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol.1, p.430. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2000.

But why should we be moral? Why should we not be selfish and fulfil only our own interests? Why should we care for others at all? To my mind, both the deontological and teleological theories have not pondered over this moot point. Rather, they have focused on the point of when an action can be considered morally right. The ethics of the *Upaniṣads*, on the other hand, has excavated much deeper in both of the cases. The answer to the question of when an action can be considered morally right, according to the *Upaniṣadic* ethics, has already been discussed above. Now, let us proceed to find out the answer to the second question: why should we be moral, following the same? We find a profound answer to this question from the Upaniṣadic doctrine of the oneness and unity of *Ātman* or *Brahman*. It shows how each flower in a garland, though unique in its colour and fragrance, is not separate from one another; likewise every existing particle in this world, being interwoven by one underlying principle – Brahman, is not different. The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* states:

‘*Sarvavyāpinamātmānam kṣīre sarpirivārpitam*’³ [1.16]

The *Upaniṣad* gives the example of butter in curd. In which layer of the curd is the butter? Is it on the surface? No, the butter is everywhere (*sarvavyāpinam*), in every drop of the curd. It is pervaded in it. Similarly, the one and the same *Brahman* is *sarvavyāpinam*— it is everywhere. The Self (*Ātman*) is all-pervasive. But we do not recognize the Self because of our ignorance. *Upaniṣadic* ethics is like churning out butter from curd wherein it lies hidden. It aims to see the Self both within and without. The *Īśa Upaniṣada* reads:

‘*Īśā vāsyamidam sarvam yat kiñca jagatyām jagat*’⁴ [1]

All this – whatever exists in this changing universe – is covered by the Lord.

In the *Bhagavad Gītā* Lord Krishna tells to Arjuna:

‘*Mattaḥ parataram nānyat kiñcidasti dhananjaya* |

Mayi sarvamidam protam sūtre mañigaṇā iva’⁵ [7.7]

Hey Dhananjaya, nothing is greater than me. The whole universe is united by me as each and every gem is interwoven by a thread.

This is the philosophy of Interconnectedness.

³ Lokeshwarananda, Swami. *Upaniṣad*, Vol.1, p.588. 95 Sarat Bose Road, Kolkata 700 026: Ananda Publishers, 2023.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.4.

⁵ Apurbananda, Swami. *Śrimadbhagavadgītā*, p.170. Kolkata: Udbodhan Karyalaya, 2013.

But what is the proof that we are interconnected and not separate from each other? Taking *śabda pramāṇa* as granted without reasoning no longer fits with our scientific bent of mind. So, let us try to find the answer by applying indirect proof (*tarka*). An indirect proof is a roundabout way of proving a theory is true. When we use the indirect proof method, we assume the opposite of our theory to be true for the time being. Here we are trying to prove the *Upaniṣadic* theory: ‘We are interconnected with each other’, i.e. ‘*p*’. If this statement ‘*p*’ is false, then its opposite ‘ $\neg p$ ’, i.e. ‘We are not interconnected with each other’, must be true. But is it so? Let’s dwell on it.

Our moral values are the ones that mainly count in shaping our actions. It affects everything we do — from how we spend our money to the interests that our nations defend. Generally, it has been accepted that we human beings are superior to and separate from all other species. This material world is nothing but an instrument of our luxury and entertainment! And we have been doing so. There is a famous saying in Bengal, ‘A tree is known by its fruit.’ Similarly, the truth value of ‘ $\neg p$ ’, i.e., ‘we are not interconnected with each other’, can be ascertained by looking at the consequences it produces. Among its various consequences, one is the pollution issue, which is a crucial problem right now. Pollutants produced by factories, smoke from cars, pesticides, chemical poisons, and garbage are damaging the purity of air, water, and land at an alarming rate. All creatures survive on the supply of Earth’s air, water and food. When these resources are polluted, the survival of all living species gets difficult. The so-called ‘Superior’ human beings are not spared from this threat either. Human beings are getting affected by dangerous diseases like cancer, tumours, depression etc.

Secondly, human activities, such as the unmeasurable use of fossil fuels and deforestation, have increased the quantity of greenhouse gases in the air. As a result, the average temperature of our planet is rising. Global warming, the rise of sea levels, floods, and earthquakes are increasing global stress day by day.

Thirdly, a leading daily (the *Times of India*, Oct. 25, 2011) reports, that electromagnetic radiation (EMR) from mobile communication towers is largely responsible for birds’ declining numbers. Sparrows, once the most common birds in India, have almost vanished due to its effect. A Ministry of Environment and Forests expert committee says the EMR has also hit honey bee numbers. The loss of honey bees will dramatically shift the human food system in the long run.

If we were not interconnected, one species’ activities wouldn’t have hampered another. However, the aforesaid consequences amply prove that here, the activity of one affects the other, whether we intend it or not.

Moreover, true knowledge should save us, not kill us. Hence, the theory: ‘we are not inter-connected with each other’, i.e. ‘ $\neg p$ ’ is incorrect—it is false. The truth value of ‘ $\neg p$ ’ being false, indirectly proves that ‘ p ’ is true. Thus, the *Upaniṣadic* theory: ‘we all are inter-connected with one another,’ is proved to be true factually and logically. Swami Vivekananda correctly said,

‘The way the law of gravity was ever existing everywhere prior to its discovery, and will continue to exist even if human society forgets about it...The ethical and spiritual relation between one soul with another...was ever existing prior to its discovery, and will continue to exist even if everyone forgets it.’⁶

One point to be noted here is that *Upaniṣadic* ethics is not purely distinct from its Spirituality. Instead, Spirituality has always been at the heart of *Upaniṣadic* ethics or the ethics of the *Upaniṣads*. Swami Vivekananda, for the first time, made the idea of *Brahman* the basis of Hindu ethics:

‘My idea is to show that the highest ideal of morality and unselfishness goes hand in hand with the highest metaphysical conception, and that you need not lower your conception to get ethics and morality...Human knowledge is not antagonistic to human wellbeing. On the contrary, it is knowledge alone that will save us in every department of life.’⁷

‘Nṛṣad varasadṛtasad vyomasadabjā gojā

ṛtajā adrijā ṛtam bṛhat’⁸ [2.ii.2]

The *Kaṭha Upaniṣada* states that the *Brahman* is everywhere. He is in human beings, in all good things, and space. He is in water as fish and other aquatic animals, and He grows as paddy, wheat, and other plants on the earth's surface. He is *ṛtajā* because He is the item used in sacrifices (*ṛta*). Coming down from the mountains, He is the streams and rivers. This *Brahman* is the highest of all things and is the Self in all. He is the essence of everything, the warp and woof of the whole universe, thereby interconnecting it all.

⁶ *Vedantagranthamala (Bengali Translation)*, Vol. 19, p.1. Golpark, Kolkata-700 029: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2015.

⁷ Vivekananda, Swami. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 2, p.355. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2000.

⁸ Lokeswarananda, Swami. *Upaniṣad*, Vol.1, p.125. 95 Sarat Bose Road, Kolkata 700 026: Ananda Publishers, 2023.

Sri Sri Ravishankar, a leading yoga guru in India, beautifully said in one of his dialogues:

‘The main thing of spirituality is to make you feel at home everywhere. The whole planet belongs to the divine. So, you feel at home anywhere, everywhere, with everyone.’

The ethics of the *Upaniṣads*, I find, is strictly acting according to it.

With this discussion, we pass from meta-ethics to normative ethics of the *Upaniṣads*. Each of us being interwoven or interconnected in one fabric, we must keep in mind that the health of our earth depends on our actions. So, from now on, we must be careful and responsible about our actions, before it gets too late. Mother Earth has never been mean to us. Whenever we needed food, it satisfied our appetite; whenever we were thirsty, it was there with cold streams of blessings; in need of shelter, it provided all necessary equipment and whatnot. Now, it is our turn to repay our debt. Swamiji said:

*‘Truth does not pay homage to any society, ancient or modern.
Society has to pay homage to Truth or die.’⁹*

Now, the question is, how do we repay our debt? The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣada* explains it simply with a story. Once, a god, a man, and a demon – the three offsprings of Brahmā – sought his advice for self-improvement. To them, Brahmā said: ‘Da’. The syllable ‘da’ is the first letter of three Sanskrit words, meaning respectively, self-control (*dama*), charity (*dāna*) and compassion (*dayā*). Brahmā was, in effect, asking the god to practise self-control, the man charity, and the demon compassion. Swami Nikhilananda points out that there exist three kinds of people – aristocrats, average men, and demoniacal men in human society. The aristocrats (e.g. scientists, political leaders, etc.), with their talents and education, have immense power to create artificial things, machines, etc. They can hinder the natural way of wildlife and jeopardize natural resources wickedly if they want. The *Upaniṣads* remind us that with huge power comes huge responsibilities. Persons with more extraordinary powers may feel a strong allurements to apply it everywhere. Here, the *Upaniṣads* warn us. We have already seen how powers, when used without any control, ultimately destroy us. So, self-control (*dama*) is very important. One must practise self-control. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣada* states –

‘Yastu vijñānavān bhavati yuktena manasā sadā|

⁹ Vivekananda, Swami. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 2, pp.84-85. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2000.

Tasyendriyāṇi vaśyāni sadaśvā iva sārathēḥ||¹⁰ [1.iii.6]

Just as ploughing land is necessary to have good crops, the *Upaniṣads* teach us that self-training and self-discipline are necessary pre-conditions of refined enjoyment.

Next, the average man, despite of his many human qualities, is often greedy; he wants to take what belongs to others. Liberality or charity (*dāna*) is his discipline for self-improvement.

*‘Tena tyaktena bhuñjīthā mā grdhaḥ kasyasvid dhanam’*¹¹ [1]

In the words of Rabindranath Tagore,

*‘My desires are many and intense, by detaching myself from them, you saved me.’*¹²

The demoniacal person takes delight in treating others with cruelty and ruthlessness. Practising compassion (*dayā*) is his only medicine.

‘Yastu sarvāṇi bhūtāni ātmanyeva anupaśyati/

*Sarvabhūteṣu cātmānam tato na vijugupsate’*¹³ [6]

He who sees all beings in the Self (*Ātman*), who does not see any being as separate or distinct from the Self, and the Self in all beings, for that reason, he does not hate anyone or does not shrink from anyone (*na vijugupsate*).

We can treat someone cruelly only if we believe that we are separate beings. But if we know he and me are the same, the one *Ātman*, by hurting him, I’m actually hurting none but me, then can we do the same? In ‘Macbeth’, the famous novel of Shakespeare, if before killing the king, Macbeth knew what damage he was going to do to himself, then would he have done the murder is a moot point.

‘Tvaṁ strī tvaṁ pumānāsi tvaṁ kumāra uta vā kumārī/

*Tvaṁ jīrṇo danḍena vañcasi tvaṁ jāto bhavasi viśvatomukhaḥ’*¹⁴ [4.3]

¹⁰ Lokeswarananda, Swami. *Upaniṣad*, Vol.1, p.102. 95 Sarat Bose Road, Kolkata 700 026: Ananda Publishers, 2023.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.4.

¹² Tagore, Rabindranath. *Rabindra-Racanabali*, Vol.7, p.96. 1/1 Acarya Jagadish Chandra Basu Road, Kolkata 700 020: Pascimbanga Bangla Academy, Tathya o Sanskrit Bibhag, West Bengal Govt., 2013.

¹³ Lokeswarananda, Swami. *Upaniṣad*, Vol.1, p.8. 95 Sarat Bose Road, Kolkata 700 026: Ananda Publishers, 2023.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.635.

Brahman is everything. He is woman, man, youth and maiden too, He as an old man totters along on a staff; it is He alone who, when born assumes diverse forms.

Tagore puts it thus:

'And suddenly, at the end of the play, what do I see today?

The sky is stunned – silent are the sun and the moon.

*In solitude, the world stands at your feet with eyes lowered.'*¹⁵

In this practical (*Vyāvahārika*) world, all that matters is a respectful life, a life of dignity. The *Upaniṣadic* ethics aims to ensure a dignified life for all of us.

The theory of our Interconnectedness gives us the answer to the moot question that why we should be moral. This ground is not only spiritual but also aptly scientific as explained above. Being interwoven in one fabric, we owe to each other, whether we accept it or not. So, let's be humble and practice the Truth through our moral codes of conduct.

Our mother *Upaniṣad* gives us a gentle pat on our back and reminds us, enough of playing children. It's time to get up. Truth is calling you. Don't be late. Arise, awake in truth.

*'Uttiṣṭhata jāgrata'*¹⁶[1.iii.14]

The law of *karma* is a fundamental concept of Hindu ethics. It holds that fear of karmic consequences is the reason why we are moral. On the contrary, the philosophy of our Interconnectedness believes that it is love and respect that drive us to be moral. Now the question is, how can fear and love, these two contradictory properties, co-exist in one system? Since, in love, there is freedom, not fear.

Rules and regulations are necessary preconditions to bring something in order initially, no doubt. For example, a kid is first sent to school, even if he doesn't want to. If the kid doesn't fear his parents and teachers and doesn't listen to them, this will ultimately affect his future. So, fear at a stage is necessary. After growing up, when he understands the importance of study and starts to love it, there is no longer any role for rules and regulations by parents or teachers. He studies on his own. Similarly, at

¹⁵ Tagore, Rabindranath. *Rabindra-Racanabali*, Vol.7, p.34. 1/1 Acarya Jagadish Chandra Basu Road, Kolkata 700 020: Pascimbanga Bangla Academy, Tathya o Sanskrit Bibhag, West Bengal Govt., 2013.

¹⁶ Lokeshwarananda, Swami. *Upaniṣad*, Vol.1, p.108. 95 Sarat Bose Road, Kolkata 700 026: Ananda Publishers, 2023.

the beginning of our journey towards truth, fear of the law of karma has a vital role to play. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* puts it thus:

*'Mahadbhayam vajramudyatam'*¹⁷ [2.iii.2]

The *Brahman*, as the *ṛtam* (the necessary law of nature), is like a thunderbolt about to strike. He is a great terror.

'Bhayādasyāgnistapati bhayātapati sūryaḥ|

*Bhayāndraśca vāyuśca mṛtyurdhāvati pañcamah||'*¹⁸ [2.iii.3]

From fear of It (Brahman), fire gives heat. Out of terror, the sun shines. Afraid of It, Indra, Vāyu, and the fifth, Death, rush to perform their respective duties.

It is worthy to note that, fear has a role in the initial stage. A fresher first remains afraid of his senior, but gradually, when he comes to know his senior well, they become very good friends. In like manner, the moment when the agent comes to know the true nature of himself, his oneness with Brahman, all his fears evaporate. Instead, only love and respect remain, which in turn regulates his moral activities. Hence, Rabindranath Tagore says:

*'To preside over my heart, despite of being the King of Kings,
You come in various guises of captivating manifestations.'*¹⁹

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.136.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 136-137.

¹⁹ Tagore, Rabindranath. *Rabindra-Racanabali*, Vol.7, p.119. 1/1 Acarya Jagadish Chandra Basu Road, Kolkata 700 020: Pascimbanga Bangla Academy, Tathya o Sanskrit Bibhag, West Bengal Govt., 2013.