

## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE UPANISHADIC PHILOSOPHY AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHY (IN THE CONTEXT OF PLATO, KANT AND HEGEL)

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**Abstract:** *The Rigveda (1.164.46) states, “Ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti,” meaning that the one ultimate truth is expressed in multiple ways by the wise. A philosopher is a person who seeks to understand the ultimate truth. Throughout the ages, human thinkers have sought to unravel the mystery of the existence and this pursuit has emerged across different cultures and historical periods. Whether the Upanishadic thinkers or Western philosophers, all have consistently sought to understand the nature of the existence. There may be superficial variations in their approaches, methods, and procedures; however, they exhibit significant similarities at the level of core principles. This research paper presents a comparative study of the Upanishadic philosophy and the thought of prominent Western philosophers such as Plato, Kant and Hegel.*

**Keywords:** *Śivam, Pudgala, Māyā, Vedānta, Noumena, Ātmā, Turīya, Jīva, Brahman, Avidyā*

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Throughout the long course of history, human beings have undertaken an extensive intellectual journey to resolve the fundamental puzzles related to the existence. Several existential questions- such as the nature of death, the purpose of life, the place of human beings in the vast cosmos, the state of being after death, and the search for eternal truth- have aroused human curiosity since the very beginning. Its earliest reflection can be seen in the Upanishadic philosophy, where the ancient Indian seers grappled with such questions and sought to discover the eternal, unchanging and immutable truth. As the sixth century BCE is widely regarded as a revolutionary period in the emergence of philosophic thought across the globe, this era witnessed the rise of the major thinkers such as the Buddha and Mahavir in India, Confucius in China, Zarathustra in Iran, and Pythagoras, Socrates and other early Greek philosophers. The same stream of philosophy is still continued in numerous ways.

Plato, Kant and Hegel occupy a central place in the Western philosophy. Although the Upanishads have influenced thinkers and philosophers across the globe and despite some superficial differences, their core philosophy aligns with the views of many prominent philosophers. This research paper presents a comparative study of the Upanishadic philosophy and the philosophies of Western thinkers such as Plato, Kant and Hegel. It presents a detailed analysis of their philosophies alongside the Upanishadic philosophy, emphasizing both similarities and differences.

### 1. A Comparative Study of Plato's Philosophy and the Upanishadic Philosophy

#### 1.1. Plato's Philosophy

Plato (427–347 BCE) was one of the most influential thinkers in the Western philosophy. His ideas about truth can be understood through his “Theory of forms”. Plato advocates the

concept of dualism. According to Plato, there are two main elements in the nature/creation:

- i. Śivam or Good or Auspicious
- ii. Matter or Pudgala

The Śivam element represents the all-pervading conscious, eternal and absolute reality. The Matter/ Pudgala represents the unconscious, inauspicious, mundane and transient nature of the reality. According to Plato, these two elements are perpetually in a state of tension with one another (Agarwal, 1978, p. 92).

Plato derived the belief of the absolute reality from the Parmenides (RUSSELL, 1946, p. 126). Parmenides was a prominent figure in the pre-Socratic philosophy. Plato distinguishes between ‘opinion’ and ‘knowledge’. Forming an ‘opinion’ is a superficial process, as it does not grasp the core or essence of things in the world and it is primarily confined to the sensory perception. Through ‘opinion’, one can only understand the transient, changing and impermanent world. In contrast, the process of ‘knowledge’ is immensely deeper, aiming to comprehend the underlying and unchanging truths beyond mere appearances. In contrast to opinion, ‘knowledge’ enables one to perceive the absolute reality, which forms the fundamental and intangible basis underlying the transient and impermanent visible world. ‘Knowledge’ involves the capacity to apprehend that which lies beyond the reach of the senses. Those who possess a passionate desire to discover absolute reality are rightly called philosophers (RUSSELL, 1946, p. 142).

Plato presents his ideas through the “Allegory of the cave” and “Theory of forms,” which are central to his distinction between ‘opinion’ and ‘knowledge.’ According to the “Theory of

forms,” the visible world is merely a shadow of the absolute reality. If one remains confined to sensory perception, one apprehends only these shadows, not the underlying reality. To know absolute reality, which lies beyond the changing and transient world, one must attain the ‘knowledge.’ The “Allegory of the cave” illustrates that only a philosopher who possess the ‘knowledge’ can escape from the cave of shadows (Buixuan, 2025, p. 87).

### **1.2.Similarities with the Upanishadic Philosophy**

- Just as Plato distinguishes between ‘opinion’ and ‘knowledge’ – acknowledging the existence of multiple science alongside a supreme science. The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad similarly refers to a supreme knowable principle (MALKANI, 1961, p. 62).
- Both Plato and the Upaniṣad recognize the changing, mundane and temporary world. While Plato designates it by the term ‘Hyle’ the Upaniṣad describe it as Māyā. Both acknowledge that true knowledge consists in recognizing the futility of this mundane world and transcending it (MALKANI, 1961, p. 63).
- Both Plato and the Upaniṣad discusses the way of liberation through acquiring true knowledge. In the ‘Phaedrus’, Plato discusses the journey of the soul. If someone throughout his life focuses on the true ‘knowledge’ and contemplates over it so he will ultimately attain the higher level of divine experience. On the other hand, if an individual is bewildered in the ‘opinion’ or the plurality of forms, his decline is inevitable (Aranjaniyil, 2002).

Similar references are found in the Śrīmadbhagavadgītā:

"Uddharet ātmanātmānam nātmanah  
avasādayet,  
Ātmaiva hyātmano bandhur ātmāiva ripur  
ātmanah." (Śrīmadbhagavadgītā 6.5)

It means one must elevate oneself by one's own efforts and refrain from self-degradation. For a human being, the self can become either his greatest friend or his greatest enemy. Such transformation is possible only through the realization of the absolute truth.

### 1.3.Points of Difference

- Whereas Plato's absolute reality is knowable through reason or logic, the Upaniṣad do not accept it. According to the philosophy of the Advaita Vedānta, the nature of the soul or the absolute reality cannot be comprehended through mere logic.

The Kaṭha Upaniṣad states:

naiṣā tarkeṇa matirāpaneyā  
proktānyenaiva sujñānāya preṣṭha.  
yām tvamāpaḥ satyadhṛtirbatāsi  
tvādr̥ṇno bhūyānnaciketaḥ praṣṭā.  
(Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.2.9)

It means that the ātmā (absolute reality) is not realized merely through study, nor through listening, nor through intellect, nor through reasoning alone. The knowledge of the self is always beyond the senses (MALKANI, 1961, p. 63).

- Plato believes in dualism, meaning he accepts the existence of both the shadow world and of the real world. He believes in the plurality of the existence. In contrast, the Upanishads recognize a singular absolute

reality, which they designate as Brahman. The appearance of plurality is merely due to illusion i.e. Māyā (Koul, 2024, p. 5).

## 2. A Comparative Study of Kant's Philosophy and the Upanishadic Philosophy

### 2.1.Kant's Philosophy

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804 CE) was one of the most influential German philosophers in the modern philosophy. His ideas can be understood through his three books:

- i. Critique of pure reason
- ii. Critique of practical reason
- iii. Critique of judgment  
(MALKANI, 1961, p. 72)

According to Kant, it is impossible to know the ultimate reality through intelligence, logic and mind. Kant says that all the experiences related to the mind are confined within space and time. These experiences are relative, meaning they are perceived through imperfect senses. Thus, Kant asserts that we cannot comprehend absolute reality through the senses and intellect. On this basis, he classifies reality into two categories:

- i. Phenomenal reality
- ii. Transcendental reality (Noumena)

Phenomenal reality refers to that which is relative, confined to the time and space, and constrained by sensory limitations. Phenomenal reality consists of imperfect knowledge, superficial knowledge, a priori knowledge and fragmented information all of which exhibit a lack of coherence/synchronization.

Transcendental reality refers to that which is beyond the reach of the senses and serves as the fundamental basis of all changing events. Transcendental reality is absolute and timeless

in the nature. It consists of posteriori knowledge, integrated understanding, and the synthesis of all the prior knowledge and experiences. Transcendental reality is like a thread that establishes coordination and synchronization across all experiences. Transcendental Reality is also referred to as 'Noumena' by Kant (Agarwal, 1978, pp. 171-173). According to Kant, we cannot fully comprehend the 'Noumena.' Kant states that God is beyond the reach of both experience and intellect (MALKANI, 1961, p. 73). According to Kant "Space and time are not concept they are forms of intuitions (RUSSELL, 1946, p. 681)."

## 2.2. Similarities with the Upanishadic Philosophy

- According to both Kant and the Upanishads, the soul is beyond the reach of the mind and intellect. This similarity is reflected in the following verse from the Kaṭha Upaniṣad.

indriyebhyaḥ parā hyarthā arthebhyasca  
param manah.  
manasastu parā buddhirbuddherātmā  
mahānparaḥ (Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.3.10)

It means that the senses are considered superior to the body, the mind is superior to the senses, and intellect is superior to the mind. Beyond intellect, the Self, that is Ātmā, is regarded as supreme.

- According to both Kant and the Upanishads, the soul is merely a seer. It means the soul is beyond the process of knowing, the knower and the known. Soul is the witness of all these stages. Similar kind of references we find in the Māṇḍūkya

Upaniṣad like different states of consciousness:

- a. Jāgrat (Waking state)
- b. Svapna (Dream state)
- c. Suṣupti (Deep sleep)
- d. Turīya (The fourth) (Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad, 1995)

Turīya state is identified with the Brahman. It is the witness or seer of all the states of consciousness (Agarwal, 1978, p. 174).

- Both Kant and the Upanishads exhibit significant similarities regarding the true freedom of human beings. According to Kant, the proximity of humans to the 'Noumena' determines the degree of their liberation. The freedom that a person attains through proximity to the 'Noumena' is reflected in the phenomenal reality (Radhakrishnan, 1911, p. 469).

A similar verse appears in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa, which emphasizes the source of freedom from all bondages.

"Sā vidyā yā vimuktaye." [ (Shri Vishnu Purana 1.19.41)]

It means that true knowledge ultimately leads to liberation. According to Kant's terminology, true knowledge is characterized by one's proximity to the 'Noumenon'.

## 2.3. Points of Difference

- According to Kant, the Absolute reality i.e. Transcendental Reality can not be experienced by human beings and remains beyond the reach of human efforts. On this

matter, the Upanishads hold a view that is completely different from Kant's. According to the Upanishads, the Jīva and Brahman are identical. The only apparent difference arises from the Jīva's ignorance of its true nature, which is known as Avidyā. According to the Upanishads, avidyā can be removed through the knowledge of the Absolute reality.

### **3. A Comparative Study of Hegel's Philosophy and the Upanishadic Philosophy**

#### **3.1.Hegel's Philosophy**

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831 CE) was a German philosopher. Hegel's major contribution is that he resolved the dualistic tension inherent in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (Srinivasan & Aithal, 2025, p. 52). According to Hegel, Absolute Reality or Absolute Consciousness can be understood and realized through rational process. Hegel says that the real is rational and rational is real (MALKANI, 1961, p. 79). It means that, through logical processes and argumentation, the Absolute Reality can be understood.

Hegel's philosophy is also known as Concrete Monism (Agarwal, 1978, p. 102). It means that there is no differentiation between individual consciousness and universal consciousness and all of these fall within the scope of human experience. According to Hegel, the process of knowledge is dialectic in nature. The dialectical process is driven through thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The long journey from Individual Consciousness to Absolute Consciousness takes place through this dialectical process of

knowledge (Srinivasan & Aithal, 2025, p. 52).

Firstly, this journey begins at the level of senses, where we find only a superficial understanding of the particular thing. In due course of time, it becomes refined through the logical process, and we see the abstract foundation behind all those separate experiences. Ultimately, it leads to the realization of the Universal Consciousness or Absolute Consciousness. The main role in this entire process is played by reason (RUSSELL, 1946, p. 704).

According to Hegel, any individual can realize the universal consciousness within himself through logical argumentations.

#### **3.2.Similarities with the Upanishadic Philosophy**

- Both Hegel and the Upaniṣad recognize that the ultimate reality can be realized by any individual.
- Both Hegel and the Upanishads recognize the role of false experiences in the process of ultimate realization. All prior experiences, whether right or wrong, are considered stepping stones in attaining the ultimate reality (RUSSELL, 1946, p. 704). This can be understood through Hegel's dialectical method i.e. thesis, antithesis and synthesis (MALKANI, 1961, p. 80).

The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad also recognizes the role of Anātman (not eternal). Only through negation of anātman can one realize the Ātman (eternal).

“Neti neti” (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.3.6)

- Both Hegel and the Upanishads recognize the coexistence of reality and delusion.



According to Hegel, “True infinitude is the unity of finite and infinite.” We find a similar kind of reference in the Śrīmad Bhagavad-gītā.

Sad asac cāham arjuna. (Śrīmad Bhagavad-gītā 9.19)

It means: ‘O arjuna, I am both sat (truth) and asat (not reality)’ (MALKANI, 1961, p. 80).

### 3.3.Points of Difference

- According to Hegel, ‘ultimate reality’ should not be understood as a static entity; rather, it is dynamic and ever-evolving. It unfolds through the earnest pursuit of knowing it, with the foundation of its unfolding grounded in logical argumentation. In contrast, the Upanishads consider the ultimate reality to be static, eternal and complete in itself (Srinivasan & Aithal, 2025, p. 52).
- According to the Upanishads, after realizing the ultimate reality (brahman), the individual (jīva) unites with the Brahman, whereas Hegel does not accept this notion (MALKANI, 1961, p. 81).
- According to the Hegel, the realization of universal consciousness occurs through reason and can take place within any individual via the dialectical process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. However, even after this realization, the individual remains distinct from the ultimate reality (MALKANI, 1961, p. 79).

### Conclusion

Thus, we observe both significant similarities and clear distinctions between Upanishadic philosophy and major strands of Western philosophy. Western philosophers such as Plato, Kant and Hegel, despite their differing methodologies and conceptual frameworks, each attempts to identify a single underlying reality. For Plato, this ultimate reality is articulated through the ‘Theory of Forms,’ which distinguishes between the world of mere appearances and the world of true being. Kant, however, concludes that the ‘Noumena’ or ‘Absolute Reality’ cannot be known through intellect or empirical reasoning, as it lies beyond the limits of human cognition. In contrast, Hegel argues that such realization occurs through reason operating within the dialectical process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

The Upanishads, too, acknowledge the importance of the reason, particularly in the process of negating Anātman. However, they maintain that reasoning alone is insufficient for the realization of the Absolute. According to the Upanishads, the ultimate truth is apprehended through direct spiritual realization, culminating in the union of the individual self (jīva) with the Absolute (Brahman).

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