

Lecture 2
Introduction to the
Philosophy of the *Upanishads*

Katha Upanishad

- philosophical, but not exactly philosophy
- story of Naciketas's encounter with Yama, the god of death
 - the story of Abraham and Isaac "gone weird"

Katha Upanishad

- N's father has offered a sacrifice to the gods
 - henotheistic religious practice
- N is disgusted with the sacrifices

"This poor offering of cows that are too old to give milk and too weak to eat grass or drink water must lead to a world of sorrow."
- N suggests his father offer something valuable as a sacrifice – such as his son.

"Father, to whom will you give me? He asked once, and twice, and three times."
- Angry, his father decides to sacrifice N to Death

"I will give you to death."

Katha Upanishad

- N travels to the abode of **Yama**, the god of death.
- No one is home.
- N waits three days and nights without food.



Katha Upanishad

- Yama's lack of hospitality creates an obligation for Yama towards Nachiketas.
"How unwise is the man who does not give hospitality to a Brahmin! He loses his future hopes, his past merits, his present possessions: his sons and his all."
• He offers N three boons
"Since you have come as a sacred guest to my abode, and you have had no hospitality for three nights, choose then three boons."



Katha Upanishad

- N's first boon concerns his present life

"May my father's anger be appeased, and may he remember me and welcome me when I return to him."



Katha Upanishad

- N's second boon concerns the after-life
– **Agni** is the god of fire

"You know, O Death, that sacred fire which leads to heaven. Explain it to me, since I have faith."



Katha Upanishad

- N's third boon concerns what is beyond life and death

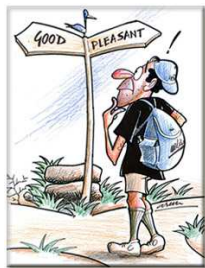
"When a man dies, this doubt arises: some say 'he is' and some say 'he is not'. Teach me the truth."



Katha Upanishad

- Death distinguishes two paths

"There is the path of joy, and there is the path of pleasure. Both attract the soul. Who follows the first comes to good; who follows pleasure reaches not the end."



Katha Upanishad

- Path of Pleasure (**kama** = pleasure)
- All pleasures are:
 - fleeting
 - produced by something external



- Pleasure cannot be an ultimate goal, because ...

"Abiding in the midst of ignorance, thinking themselves wise and learned, fools go aimlessly hither and thither, like blind led by the blind."

"I know that treasures pass away and that the Eternal is not reached by the transient."

Katha Upanishad

- Path of Joy
 - Joy comes from within
 - Joy is not dependent upon an external relation to things
- Joy can be an ultimate goal, because ...

"When the wise rests his mind in contemplation on our God beyond time ..., then he rises above pleasures and sorrow. When a man has heard and has understood and, finding the essence, reaches the Inmost, then he finds joy in the Source of joy. Naciketas is a house open for thy Atman, thy God."

Katha Upanishad

- How does one attain joy?
- By knowing what reality really is – by knowing the Atman.

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- Two Questions:
 - What is Atman?
 - How can it be known?

"Concealed in the heart of all beings is the Atman, the Spirit, the Self, smaller than the smallest atom, greater than the vast spaces. The man who surrenders his human will leaves sorrows behind, and beholds the glory of the Atman by the grace of the Creator."

Katha Upanishad

- **Atman** is the "I".
 - superficial vs. deep sense of self
- *Basic Assumption of Upanishads*: Each of us has an Atman.

"Atman, the Spirit of vision, is never born and never dies. Before him there was nothing, and he is ONE for evermore. Never-born and eternal, beyond times gone or to come, he does not die when the body dies."

"The Atman is beyond sound and form, without touch and taste and perfume. It is eternal, unchangeable, and without beginning or end: indeed above reasoning."

Katha Upanishad

- The only way to know Atman is through personal experience, because ...
 - **satya** = being or truth
 - transformation into the truth
- Teacher's role is to put the pupil inside the experience

"He cannot be taught by one who has not reached him; and he cannot be reached by much thinking. The way to him is through a Teacher who has seen him: he is higher than the highest thoughts, in truth above all thought."

Katha Upanishad

- Experience of the Atman is the goal of the path of joy, because ...
- Those on the path of pleasure allow horses to steer them
- Those on the path of joy steer the horses

"Know the Atman as Lord of a chariot; and the body as the chariot itself. Know that reason is the charioteer; and the mind indeed is the reins. The horses, they say, are the senses; and their paths are the objects of sense. ... The man who chariot is driven by reason, who watches and holds the reins of the mind, reaches the end of the journey, the supreme everlasting Spirit."

Katha Upanishad

- The name for ultimate reality is **Brahman**
 - not to be confused with **Brahma** or **Brahmin**
 - Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are manifestations of a single underlying reality: Brahman (see next slide)
- "Brahman" = "that which makes things great"

"Beyond the senses are their objects, and beyond the objects is the mind. Beyond mind is pure reason, and beyond reason is the Spirit in man. Beyond the Spirit in man is the Spirit of the universe, and beyond is Purusha, the Spirit Supreme. Nothing is beyond Purusha: He is the End of the path."

Brahma / Vishnu / Shiva



Katha Upanishad

- Initial unclarity about nature of Brahman:
 - ultimate → not limited
 - all our experiences are of things that are limited
 - not limited → beyond our experiences
 - beyond our experiences → beyond description

"Invisible, incomprehensible, without genealogy, colorless, without eye or ear, without hands or feet, unending, pervading all and omnipresent, that is the unchangeable ONE whom the wise regard as the source of all beings."

–Mundaka Upan.

Katha Upanishad

- *Katha Upan.* suggests that Brahman can be experienced by coming to know one's Atman, because ...

- This is the key philosophical discovery of the *Upanishads*.

"There is one Ruler, the Spirit that is in all things, who transforms his own form into many. Only the wise who see him in their souls attain the joy eternal. He is the eternal among things that pass away, pure Consciousness of conscious beings, the ONE who fulfills the prayers of many."

Katha Upanishad

- Knowing Brahman has a practical upshot: one attains moksha from samsara
 - **samsara** = cycle of death and rebirth, of pleasure and frustration and boredom and suffering
 - **moksha** = freedom
 - moksha is preferable to samsara, because ...



Katha Upanishad



"If one sees him [Brahman] in this life before the body passes away, one is free from bondage; but if not, one is born and dies again in new worlds and new creations."

"The foolish run after outward pleasure and fall into the snares of vast-embracing death. But the wise have found immortality, and do not seek the Eternal in things that pass away."

"When a mortal knows [Brahman], he attains liberation and reaches immortality."

Katha Upanishad

- Knowledge of Brahman requires the practice of yoga, because ...

– **yoga** = disciplined self-practice



"When the five senses are still and the reason itself rests in silence, then begins the Path supreme. The calm steadiness of the senses is called Yoga."

"The Atman is not reached by the weak, or the careless, or those who practice wrong austerity; but the wise who strive in the right way lead their soul into the dwelling of Brahman."

– *Mundaka Upan.*

Katha Upanishad

- Yoga points one in the right direction: like yoke on oxen.
 - many different kinds (more on this later)



Mandukya Upanishad

- Explicitly identifies Atman with Brahman
 - Identification in *Katha Upan.* is implicit

"Brahman is all and Atman is Brahman."

Mandukya Upanishad

- Also provides an analysis of **four kinds of consciousness**
 - *ordinary waking life*
 - outwardly directed to external objects
 - *imagination & dreaming*
 - inwardly directed to contents of one's thoughts
 - *dreamless sleep*
 - conscious, but not conscious of anything
 - lacks an object, but self is present
 - *self-less awareness*
 - lacks an object
 - also lacks consciousness of oneself
 - this is Atman

Mandukya Upanishad

- Memory of the experience of self-less awareness is evidence for the existence of Atman
 - this makes claims about the existence of Atman *philosophical*, not merely faith-based.
- "In the union with him is the supreme proof of his reality."

Mandukya Upanishad

- Knowledge of Atman is similar to knowledge of love
 - only those who have experienced love know what it is
 - for the person having the experience, nothing could be more certain than the truth of the experience itself



Mandukya Upanishad

- Also identifies Atman with the Sanskrit word OM
 - think of sounds like "Brrrr", which have the power to convey how we are feeling
 - repeating "OM" should put you in touch with ultimate reality



How to Say "OM"

- Start in the back of the mouth with "ahhh"
 - this sound is made with your throat
- Slowly fill the mouth with "oo"
 - feel it resonating in your mouth
- Close the mouth with "mmm"
 - draw this sound out the longest
 - take a deep breath before beginning again

Mandukya Upanishad

- Symbolism: Sound
 - the first three sounds are the first three states of consciousness, respectively
 - the fourth state of consciousness is ...



Mandukya Upanishad

- Symbolism: Writing
 - large lower curve on right :: ordinary consciousness
 - upper curve on left :: dreamless sleep consciousness
 - lower curve on left :: consciousness of imagination & dreaming
 - connects ordinary consciousness & dreamless sleep consciousness
 - dot :: Atman
 - illuminates everything else
 - curve below dot :: maya
 - open on top because maya does not affect Atman
 - (more on Maya next lecture)



figure itself :: entire universe

Reading for Next Time

- Kupperman: 3-21
- *The Upanishads*
 - Maitri Upanishad 2.3-5; 2.7: 99-100

Websites for Om Chanting

- Choir Chant (small):
<http://www.selfasinstrument.com/products.html?gclid=CIDo8M6VhoYCFStzGgodeEW3iw>
- Chant:
http://www.thepurplepeople.com/room13_universal_om.mp3
- Choir Chant (large):
http://www.thepurplepeople.com/room13_ultimate_om.mp3
