

## Existentialism and Indian Thought on Existence: Towards an Integrative Approach

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### ABSTRACT

In my paper I attempt to bring together elements from Western and Eastern Ontological thought to suggest that there is a huge possibility of exchange between the two systems of thought. What has hitherto been considered an exclusively western movement has deep set roots in Indian culture and philosophical thought. On the whole, I argue that the Advaita Vedanta offers a vista into a happier world with lesser anxiety – coming from pre modern India where belief and rationality both were rooted in non-duality.

*Keywords:* advaita, non-dual, Indian culture, pre modern

The philosophy of existentialism is a western philosophy that took starkest shape at the end of the second world war in the face of abject human depravity. Perhaps, this is the reason behind the nihilistic tinge in the western philosophy of existentialism. Another way to ascertain the nature of existentialism is to situate the movement at the cusp between modernism and postmodernism. Existentialism was a result of decades of decartian thinking falling apart at the hands of an incomprehensible set of human realities. Scepticism was a late awakening after hundreds of years in western thought.

On the other hand, pre modern Indian society has had a culture and history of seeking necessitating the element of scepticism in Indian thought. Determinism has been the root cause of the existential angst in a speedily industrialising world.

One of the key texts of Indian philosophy that offer an explanation about the nature of human existence is the Mandukya Upanishad, a part of the Advaita Vedanta tradition of Indian philosophy. With the rise of a scientific fervour in rapidly materialising utilitarian societies, there has been a tendency to focus on the tangible aspects of life with a future oriented outlook.

This has cost the modern society in terms of loss of meaning as a result of detachment from the present. A divided notion of time and being are at the root of this alienation. It is a similar failure to realise the continuum of space and time within life that lead to the fall of the charvakas, the school of Indian philosophy from the nastika tradition which were most closely connected to the materialists from the western tradition. It is interesting to note that western psychoanalysis regarding the human mind limits itself at the level of the unconscious and its rise from a state of repression. There is a relatively underdeveloped understanding of the concept of consciousness in that part of the world. At most, it is understood as a manifestation of the neurophysiological abilities of the human brain. In the east on the other hand, there have been years of explorations of the human mind. The atavistic psychology understands the pivotal importance of consciousness which is the unique perceptive ability of humankind. It is also remarkable that Indian philosophy conceives of consciousness as ever present. The vedantins divide human life in three different states – the waking state, the dreaming state and the deep sleep state. At the same time, it talks of an ever present fourth state – denoted by the sanskrit term 'Turya'. This fourth dimension of the human mind is that of the ever present observer which has a constant vision of the past, present and the future. This suggests that once the awareness of the human mind is raised to a level from which a wholesome view of being can be attained, anxiety of the future which coexists with the present is lost in a moment. True self-realisation can happen when an individual realises the

temporality of human life in the waking state itself. It is worth mentioning at this point that key existentialist thinkers hated the label 'existentialism'. Most of them would prefer on the other hand to be talked about as developing a flexible philosophy for existence. The very fixity of any 'ism' became the cause for repulsion for this group of philosophers as such an interpretation of their philosophy snatches away the element of individual freedom which is the core quintessence of their entire philosophy. On the other hand the agile systems of Indian philosophy allow ample space for questioning and self-doubt. For the advaitins, the universe has one larger being that is at the centre of all activity. All other living beings are part of the larger being and at the same time constitute a portion of the ultimate reality, the larger being, within themselves. Most western ontological narratives whether Greek or European are based on a dualistic understanding of the universe.

The Indian ontological efforts on the other hand are inward oriented. In this shift in focus from being "out there" to being within oneself, a large part of the hitherto experienced anxiety is tackled and ultimately given up. Western metaphysics and ontological philosophy developed with the background of Judeo-Christianity which, based on a fixed set of commandments could do nothing but have a dualist and even binary vision of life. With the advent of science and the advancement of technology this world view was even more intensified and material possessions gained the centre stage. It is but an obvious result that the masses would feel alienated and the time in Hamlet's words would seem out of joint. Modernity and industrialisation, however are not phenomenon that stayed limited to the European scenario. It would be interesting to study the way existential anxiety impacted a differently shaped society like India.

One of the ways suggested to enhance consciousness is yoga. Yoga is the science of unification with the universe at large.

The word yoga essentially means bringing two or more apparently disparate things together. It is a fact beyond doubt that modernity was the age of fragmentation and alienation and as we move ahead in the century, this has only intensified. Thus an age old and time tested method of bringing the human whole together is an antidote worth trusting. The true yogi is able to unite himself/herself with the forces in nature. But in an environment rife with capitalism and materialism, this becomes all the more difficult. It is a useful observation that India in many a sense is not yet a fully modern nation by western standards. In many places, the family ties and socially upheld values still have a major sway in decisions people make. Caste hierarchies are still strict and strongly adhered to in many areas of the country. Superstitions and emotional outbursts in the name of imagined religious piousness and social conformity are a common sight. Honour killings, mob lynching's and mob courts are therefore a common sight. Partially developed societies like India seem to be at the greatest risk from an influx of modernity. These societies absorb the worse portions of both the modern and a pre modern way of life and end up with a concocted chaos with little hope for individual decision making. Unabashed materialism and consumerism get the better of them and give rise to what I call the collective inferiority complex. This is one of the major reasons behind issues like brain drain and mass migrations from the developing countries to the west. The fleeting dream of better livelihoods in terms of monetary benefits tears families apart. The modern age has made a mistake limiting all its attention to developing mere sensory abilities. With the rise of the digital age, round the clock media coverage and such other so called developments, these societies and individuals in them are more exposed to existential threats. Caste and gender discriminations can easily trigger existential anxiety. The human environment is also under tremendous existential threat because of unsustainable anthropomorphic practices. (Ex: mining, deforestation, pollution etc.). The advaitins understand the

cosmic whole as a manifestation of the larger being and also pervaded by the larger being. The Upanishads understand worldly existence as a state of avidya in the influence of maya – the illusory nature of life's externalities. Interestingly the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita do not prescribe asceticism or materialism (the two extremes) as a way to jeevan-mukti (liberation in this life itself). It is here that the notion of Karma comes into play. Karma is an account of deeds of human beings committed in previous incarnations. What is interesting here for me is an attempt to create an explainable wholeness rather than the actual workings of Karma. The sense of oneness with the larger being comes about as a mixed process of a period of preparation and a sudden moment of unexplainable realisation. It is a clear indication that a complete realisation of one's own self is beyond the limitations of science.

The cycle of realisation according to the advaitins is called sat-chit-ananda which translates itself into existence-knowledge-bliss. There are two selves in the human personality according to vedantic philosophy – the empirical and the transcendental self (potential for self-awareness realisable through Yoga). The full flowering of the conscious self is possible only when both the selves are developed uniformly. Once this is attained, an individual is in a state of complete bliss – ananda i.e. self-realisation. One of the primary necessities for a realisation of the true self is an attempt to go beyond the limitations of sensory perceptive abilities. A higher state of self-realisation requires a higher state of consciousness. A state of equanimity attained through meditation is one of the vital ways to realise the nature of true self. One of the ways to reduce existential anxiety is by reducing the desire for causal change in the state of being through self-discipline. In eastern mysticism self-existence is pivotal. This can be attained through what the mystics call the metamorphosis of the spirit. The German existentialist Friedrich Nietzsche describes the cycle of realisation of the true self in three phases: discipline, questioning and the awakening of a new

potentiality. The vendantins believe that intelligent self-organisation can lead to realisation of the reality. The realm in which true being can be realised is a trans-personal, trans-ego and trans-psychic consciousness. The nature of being is existentially one in spiritual consciousness – one overmastering impulse towards the larger being. William Blake refers to a similar process of self-realisation as “cleaning of the doors of perception.” All negativities are given away and things are accepted as they are (yathabhutam).

The upanishads adopt a method of negation and affirmation to arrive at the true nature of the individual being ie. the Atman. The atman is not the ego, not the mind, not not the intellect but the element of transcendence within us.

According to Sri Aurobindo, a great mystic of the modern age, it is within the power of man to boldly face the vital problems of existence and to solve them. The solution neither in violent revolution (the marxian dream) nor in accepting the situation impotently (the postmodern condition). Rather, the solution lies in the spiritual reconstruction of the society. Sri Aurobindo believed in the revelation of the overmind power or the supermind power. Similar to nietzsche’s notion of the superman, it goes much beyond the dictated realm of social ethics.

For many philosophers art is a solution of the existential angst because it goes beyond the utilitarian model of modern life and thus attains a certain kind of transcendence of its own.

Awareness of the whole universe is the aim of an evolved consciousness. It aims to realise the beginningless and the endless nature of time. Interestingly, Einstein’s theory of relativity also looks at time frames as a fluid medium where the future is not necessarily ahead in time and the past behind. Futurity is a phenomenon that is experienced because of the limitations of the sensory medium with regard to the perception

of the cosmic whole. For the artist, the universe is an undifferentiated aesthetic continuum. The aim of meditative practice is a boundless expansion of consciousness into absolute void. For the noted philosopher Erich Fromm who has been notably influenced by the Upanishads, self-realisation is “polarised union with the absolute.” Once such a union is attained there is no sense of alienation. One gains the ability to see oneself in others and vice a versa. Such an understanding of the world has a major significance today as it can become pivotal to conflict and peace studies.

In the modern age, the society and the individual appear in conflict. The flesh and blood individuality of a person is lost. Socialisation happens at the cost of de-individualisation. This has happened because of an untiring concentration on outward life. There is a need for a revaluation of the accepted human values. There is a pressing need to revitalising creative self-expression. Many a times, an overflow of ideas leads thinkers to get carried away. This leads to the neglect of their own being. The result of this neglect is an inner anguish of the soul. Indian philosophy takes us beyond Heidegger's conception of the nature of being and is thus of immense importance to the project of ontology. The vedantic philosophy perceives the body as a vessel and demonstrates that self-realisation is a possibility right amid this world. When the heart and the intellect work together, *sadhna* (contemplation) becomes a way of life. A true *jivan-mukta* (enlightened one) is able to transcend pleasure/pain, past/future and is able to accept the present as it is.

The practice of detachment is essential to the realisation of the true self. Such a person experiences the sheer bliss of being alive. One point is clearly proven through the study of the *advaita vedanta* in relation to existence and this point is that we need to change our views regarding the logocentric position of mankind in relation to the world. The fact on the contrary is that we are living in a large chain of multiple beings where every

conscious being is equal to the other and must not be discriminated against. Such an assimilative understanding of reality can have immense contemporary significance. The Buddhist conception of life and the nature of consciousness is also of immense importance to improve the nature and quality of life of individuals today. Early Buddhism puts immense impetus on the individual self and scholars in the field have translated the 'atta' of Pali into 'self' in English. In Buddhism there is a focus on the Buddha being in love with his inner self (ajjhatarato) in opposition to the attasambhava which corresponds to the worldly phenomenon of man's existence. Buddhism focuses on the notion of shunyata as the ideal state for self-realisation. The madhyamika school of Buddhism suggests that the middle path in life is the way to go about things. Involvement of the self with both pleasure and pain are both illusions. Both the Upanishads and Buddhism advocate non attachment as the route to self-realisation. Buddhism accepts the existential reality of man and refuses to give in to any preconceived notions of karma from the past life affecting actions in the present life. It conceives of human beings as absolutely free individuals having the autonomy to make a choice. Sovereignty of the self is of immense importance to the Buddhists. This can be thought of as the Indian version of mastering the self so that the true nature of existence can be realised. Buddhism is the ultimate philosophy of mindful existence, so central for human beings to realise a happy life. The chariot and driver metaphor has been used several times in the Buddhist canon. The Buddhist seeker pledges to control the urges of his mind just like an elephant is prevented from running astray by a closed door.

For the Buddhist the path to salvation is free from fear and the one based on conscientious decision making based on the eightfold path that the Buddha propounded to lead a fulfilling life. Henceforth, we try to relate the learning's from these two

rich traditions of Indian philosophy and try to evaluate its importance in the contemporary scenario.

Decades of scientific learning has trained the human mind to recognise the differences but they fall short when it comes to realising the similarities in existential life. This is what has kept mankind for years from a meaningful enquiry into a nature of its own being. In a world where we see national, regional and communal identities strengthening themselves beyond limits and yet living individual people alienated, such a philosophy as the advaitins advocate can lead to a more compassionate and comprehensible world. These ideas inspire individuals to lead a more authentic life devoid of the limitations created by caste, gender, nationality, religion, ethnicity etc. All political leaders worth their name today are striving hard to establish world peace. What started out as existential anxiety at its peak in the 20th century can very well be tackled in the 21st if the human condition today is taken as a resolvable challenge and the pre modern wisdom of India given necessary space and standing on the global scene.

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