

The Upaniṣadika Foundations of the Sanātana Dharma: A Philosophical Perspective

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Abstract

Sanātana Dharma, often referred to as Hinduism, finds its foundational philosophical underpinnings in the *Upaniṣads*, which form the core of Vedantic thought. This paper explores the epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical dimensions of the Upanishads in shaping the Sanātana Dharma. The Upanishads provide a transcendental framework, articulating concepts such as *Brahman* (ultimate reality), *Ātman* (self), and *Mokṣa* (liberation). The dialectical method employed in the Upanishads paves the way for a non-dogmatic, introspective approach to understanding reality, which challenges the positivist epistemology. Through a detailed analysis of major Upanishadic texts, this study underscores how their philosophical discourse contributes to a integral, perennial, and self-renewing spiritual tradition. The synthesis of *Jñāna* (knowledge), *Bhakti* (devotion), and *Karma* (action) within the Upanishadic paradigm offers a unique model for contemporary philosophical discourse, particularly in contrast to Western metaphysical traditions. By examining key Upanishadic texts, this study demonstrates how their teachings shape the worldview, practices, and moral framework of *Sanātana* Dharma. The work further emphasizes the need for reviving Upanishadic epistemology as a means to reformulate the scientific method beyond rigid positivism.

Keywords: Sanātana Dharma, Upaniṣads, Vedānta, Brahman, Ātman, Mokṣa.

Introduction

Sanātana Dharma, referred to as the "eternal way," represents the timeless spiritual and philosophical traditions of India. Rooted in the Vedic corpus, its foundational principles are deeply embedded in the Upanishads, the philosophical culmination of Vedic thought. The Upaniṣads, also known as *Vedānta*, offer profound insights into the nature of reality, self, and ultimate truth, forming the epistemic and metaphysical core of *Sanātana* Dharma. Unlike dogmatic faiths, it is characterized by an open-ended exploration of truth through rational inquiry and meditation. The Upaniṣads, dating from 800 BCE to 200 BCE, constitute the *Jñāna Kāṇḍa* (knowledge portion) of the Vedas and serve as

the philosophical substratum of Hindu thought. This paper examines how the Upaniṣads lay the epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical foundations of *Sanātana* Dharma.

The Upaniṣads explore basic philosophical questions such as the nature of Brahman (the ultimate reality), Ātman (the individual self), and the relationship between the two. They challenge empirical and positivist methods of knowledge acquisition, advocating for a deeper, intuitive, and experiential understanding of truth. Through concepts like Advaita (non-duality), the unity of existence, and the interplay of *karma* and *mokṣa* (liberation), they lay a robust intellectual foundation for *Sanātana* Dharma. This philosophical perspective examines how the Upaniṣads shape the epistemology, ethics, and ontology of *Sanātana* Dharma. It highlights the contrast between Western positivist methodologies and the holistic, integrative approach of Indian philosophical traditions. It also underscores the relevance of Upaniṣadika wisdom in contemporary discourses on science, spirituality, and human well-being. This study aims to evaluate the Upaniṣadika contributions to *Sanātana* Dharma, emphasizing their enduring significance in philosophical inquiry and the search for ultimate truth.

Upaniṣadika Epistemology: Beyond Empiricism and Rationalism

The Upaniṣads, the philosophical texts of Hinduism, offer a unique epistemology that transcends the binary of empiricism and rationalism. Although Western epistemology traditionally oscillates between sensory experience (empiricism) and reason (rationalism) as the primary sources of knowledge, Upaniṣadika thought introduces a third dimension, that is, direct intuitive insight (*anubhava*) through deep contemplation. This mode of knowing transcends sensory experience and logical deduction, advocating a non-dual realization of Brahman. The concept of '*Tat Tvam Asi*' ('Thou art That') from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* epitomizes this direct, non-dual realization. Such approach challenges the limitations of positivist methodologies and offers a more holistic view of knowledge, integrating empirical, rational, and supra-rational elements.

Empiricism, championed by thinkers like John Locke and David Hume, posits that knowledge arises from sensory experience. However, its reliance on perception makes it vulnerable to illusions and subjective distortion¹. Rationalism, on the other hand, as seen in

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the works of Descartes and Leibniz, argues that reason and innate ideas are the sources of true knowledge. Yet, it faces criticism for its abstraction and detachment from empirical reality². The Upaniṣads challenge both paradigms by suggesting that neither sense perception nor reason alone can grasp ultimate reality (*Brahman*).

Upaniṣadika epistemology introduces *anubhava* (direct experience) as the highest form of knowing. Unlike empirical perception, that is limited by the senses, or rational deduction, which remains conceptual, *anubhava* is an immediate, non-mediated awareness of reality. The Chandogya Upaniṣad (6.1.3) exemplifies this through the famous dialogue between Uddalaka and Śvetaketu, where knowledge of *Tat Tvam Asi* (Thou art That) is imparted not through argument but through experiential realization³.

Same as, the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (1.1.5-6) differentiates between para vidya (higher knowledge) and apara vidya (lower knowledge). Aparā vidyā includes empirical and rational sciences, but para vidya is the direct knowledge of Brahman, attained through deep meditation and self-inquiry⁴. This transcendence of empirical and rational boundaries indicates a non-dual epistemology that integrates both but ultimately surpasses them.

Unlike the Western tradition, which often prioritizes individual reasoning, the *Upaniṣads* emphasize Shruti (revealed knowledge) and the Guru-Śiṣya (teacher-student) tradition as essential epistemic modes. Knowledge is not merely a private cognitive act but a transmission through lived experience and dialogue. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (1.2.23) states, "This Self cannot be attained by study, nor by intellect, nor by hearing many scriptures; it is gained only by him whom the Self chooses"⁵. This underscores that truth is realized existentially, not merely discursively.

The Upaniṣadika approach offers a critique of positivist methodologies that dominate modern science and philosophy. By integrating *pratyakṣa* (perception), *anumāna* (inference), and *anubhava* (intuition) into a comprehensive epistemology, it suggests that true knowledge requires synthesis rather than opposition. In contemporary debates, scholars like Matilal and Mohanty have argued that Indian epistemology offers a middle path between realism and idealism, bridging subjective and objective dimensions of reality⁶.

Upaniṣadika epistemology transcends the empirical-rational divide by positing *anubhava* as the highest form of knowledge. Unlike the fragmented approach of Western epistemology, it presents a holistic vision of knowing, where empirical, rational, and supra-rational elements converge in direct realization. This paradigm shift is not just philosophical but has insightful

implications for science, consciousness studies, and contemporary epistemology.

Metaphysical Framework: *Brahman*, *Ātman*, and *Mokṣa*

The *Upaniṣads* assert that Brahman is the singular, formless, and infinite reality, while *Ātman* is its individualized essence within beings. The realization of their unity leads to *Mokṣa*, the liberation from *Samsāra* (cycle of birth and death). Texts like the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* elaborate on the ineffability of Brahman through the *neti-neti* (not this, not this) method, emphasizing the transcendence of material existence. The Upaniṣads, foundational texts of Indian philosophy, explore the nature of reality through the concepts of *Brahman* (Ultimate Reality), *Ātman* (Self), and *Mokṣa* (Liberation). These concepts form the core of Advaita Vedānta and other philosophical traditions within Hindu thought.

Brahman is described as the supreme, infinite, and formless reality underlying all existence. It is beyond sensory perception and mental comprehension. The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* defines Brahman as "*ekam eva advītiyam*"—one without a second⁷. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.1)⁸ states, "*satyam jñānam anantam brahma*," meaning Brahman is truth, knowledge, and infinity. *Ātman*, often equated with the individual self or soul, is considered identical to Brahman in Advaita Vedānta. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.4.10)⁹ declares, "*aham brahmāsmi*" ("I am Brahman"), signifying the unity of the individual self with the cosmic reality. In contrast, some dualistic interpretations (Dvaita Vedānta) distinguish *Ātman* from *Brahman*, viewing it as eternally dependent on God.

Mokṣa, or liberation, is the realization of *Ātman*'s unity with *Brahman*, freeing one from the cycle of birth and rebirth (*samsāra*). The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (2.3.1.4) states, "When all desires that dwell in the heart fall away, then the mortal becomes immortal and attains Brahman." *Mokṣa* is attained through self-knowledge (*jñāna*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and renunciation (*sannyāsa*). The Upaniṣadika metaphysical framework presents a non-dualistic (Advaita), dualistic (Dvaita), and qualified non-dualistic (Viśiṣṭādvaita) understanding of Brahman and *Ātman*, each leading to different conceptions of *Mokṣa*. Ultimately, the goal is to transcend ignorance and realize the eternal truth of one's existence.

Ethical and Existential Dimensions

Another significant aspect of Upaniṣadika teachings is ethical discourse of Sanātana Dharma. The Upaniṣads explore profound ethical and existential dimensions that continue to resonate with contemporary concerns. The principle of Dharma (righteous duty) is

aligned with the cosmic order (*Rta*). Ethical living, according to the *Upaniṣads*, is a means to purify the mind and attain self-realization. The Katha Upaniṣad, through the dialogue between Nachiketas and Yama, highlights the existential choice between *preyas* (pleasure) and *śreyas* (the good), reinforcing the spiritual discipline necessary for higher wisdom. One of the most profound stories in the Upaniṣads is that of Nachiketa, a young seeker of truth, and Yama, the god of death, as recounted in the Katha Upaniṣad. When Nachiketa meets Yama, he is offered material riches and power but instead insists on understanding the nature of life, death, and the eternal soul. Yama, impressed by his resolve, imparts the knowledge of the immortal self (*Ātman*) and its unity with Brahman. This story, much like a philosophical parable, illustrates the enduring human quest for truth beyond material distractions. Its emphasis on self-realization as the ultimate goal of life continues to inspire spiritual seekers and thought leaders across cultures.

The *Upaniṣads*, as the philosophical culmination of the *Vedas*, play a crucial role in shaping the ethical discourse of Sanātana Dharma. These ancient texts provide profound insights into the nature of reality, self (*ātman*), and ultimate truth (*Brahman*), thereby influencing moral and ethical frameworks. Unlike prescriptive ethics, as found in some Western traditions, Upaniṣadika ethics are deeply rooted in metaphysical understanding, emphasizing self-realization, unity of existence, and dharmic living. The Upaniṣads advocate an ethical life through knowledge (*jñāna*), self-discipline, and righteous living. Concepts such as *Satya* (truth), *Ahimsā* (non-violence), *Dāna* (charity), and *Brahmacharya* (self-restraint) form the core of Upaniṣadika ethics.

Satya (Truthfulness): The *Upaniṣads* stress the significance of truthfulness and honesty in one's words and actions. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.4.14) declares, "*Satyam eva jayate nāṇṛtam*" ¹⁰ ("Truth alone triumphs, not falsehood"). This principle underscores the importance of truthfulness as a moral duty.

Ahimsā (Non-violence): Though more elaborately developed in later Hindu and Jain traditions, the Upaniṣads hint at non-violence as an ethical necessity. Many *Upaniṣads* emphasize the importance of non-violence and compassion towards all living beings. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (8.15.1) suggests that a realized being sees all existence as interconnected, reducing the impulse to harm others ¹¹.

Dāna (Charity and Generosity):

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (5.2.3) presents the divine exhortation "*Datta Dayadhvam Damyatā*"

("Give, Be Compassionate, Be Self-Restrained"), emphasizing selfless giving and compassion as ethical imperatives ¹².

Brahmacharya (Self-restraint and Purity):

The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (3.1.5) describes self-discipline and austerity as essential for gaining higher knowledge ¹³.

The idea of *Karma* (action and its consequences) is another key ethical teaching from the *Upaniṣads*. The Īśa Upaniṣad (verse 2) instructs individuals to perform selfless action without attachment to results, promoting an ethics of duty rather than mere consequence ¹⁴. Unlike rigid rule-based ethics, the Upaniṣadika moral vision is universal, advocating a sense of oneness with all beings. The Mahāvākya (great saying) "*Tat Tvam Asi*" ("Thou art That") from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.8.7) implies that ethical behavior arises naturally when one realizes that all beings are manifestations of the same ultimate reality ¹⁵. This realization fosters compassion, humility, and a sense of responsibility toward others.

Upaniṣadika ethics continue to influence contemporary discussions on morality, emphasizing:

- 1) Ecological Ethics: The interconnectedness of life promotes environmental responsibility.
- 2) Social Justice: The recognition of the divine in all beings supports human dignity and equality.
- 3) Spiritual Ethics: Ethical living is seen as integral to spiritual progress rather than a separate domain of human activity.

The Upaniṣads shape the ethical discourse of Sanātana Dharma by providing a metaphysical basis for moral principles. Unlike dogmatic ethical systems, they emphasize inner transformation and self-realization, guiding individuals toward righteous living through truth, non-violence, compassion, and self-restraint. These teachings continue to inspire moral philosophy, both in Hindu traditions and global ethical thought. On the other hand, the existential aspects of the Upaniṣads encompass fundamental insights into the human condition, the nature of reality, and the search for meaning.

Implications for Contemporary Philosophy and Science

Modern science, often grounded in a positivist methodology, may benefit from the Upaniṣadika model of epistemology, which acknowledges dimensions of consciousness beyond empirical verification. Quantum physics, with its emphasis on observer-dependent reality, resonates with the Upaniṣadika assertion that consciousness is fundamental to existence. A re-examination of the scientific method through

Upaniṣadika insights could pave the way for a more integrative paradigm of knowledge.

The *Upaniṣads*, as the philosophical core of the Vedic tradition, provide profound insights that extend beyond ancient metaphysics into contemporary philosophical and scientific discourses. Their emphasis on consciousness, epistemology, and the interconnectedness of reality resonates with modern discussions in philosophy, quantum physics, and cognitive science. This paper explores the relevance of Upaniṣadika thought in contemporary knowledge systems, highlighting its implications for metaphysics, ethics, and scientific inquiry.

Modern philosophers such as David Chalmers and Thomas Nagel have explored panpsychism—the idea that consciousness is a fundamental property of the universe. The Upaniṣadika assertion that consciousness is the substratum of all existence anticipates this view, suggesting that the material world is an expression of an underlying intelligence rather than mere physical matter¹⁶ (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.10;). Quantum physicists such as Werner Heisenberg and Erwin Schrödinger were deeply influenced by Upaniṣadika teachings, particularly regarding the observer's role in shaping reality. Schrödinger, for instance, drew parallels between quantum mechanics and the Upaniṣadika vision of an indivisible, interconnected reality¹⁷. The concept of *Māyā* (illusion) in the *Upaniṣads* aligns with contemporary discussions on the probabilistic nature of quantum states, where reality is not fixed but depends on observation¹⁸. The *Upaniṣads* emphasize direct experiential knowledge (*aparokṣānubhūti*) over mere empirical or inferential knowledge (*pratyakṣa* and *anumāna*). This aligns with modern critiques of scientism, which argue that empirical methods alone cannot explain subjective consciousness. The hard problem of consciousness, articulated by David Chalmers, questions how subjective experience arises from physical processes. The Upaniṣadika perspective, particularly in the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, describes different states of consciousness—waking (*jāgrat*), dreaming (*svapna*), deep sleep (*suṣupti*), and the transcendental (*turiya*)—which closely resemble modern classifications of conscious experience in neuroscience¹⁹. There are limits of rationalism and Empiricism in philosophical movements. So, Kantian philosophy acknowledges the limits of pure reason, arguing that ultimate reality (noumenon) is inaccessible to empirical science²⁰. The *Upaniṣads* propose a similar view, stating that Brahman is beyond conceptualization

yet directly realizable through higher consciousness²¹ (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.1.8;). This has implications for discussions on the epistemic limitations of science in explaining metaphysical realities.

Ethical and Ecological Implications in Science and Philosophy deals Upaniṣadika teachings contribute significantly to ethical philosophy, particularly in environmental ethics, AI ethics, and bioethics. The *Upaniṣads* advocate a comprehensive view of life, seeing all beings as interconnected. This is reflected in the modern deep ecology movement, which recognizes intrinsic value in all forms of life²². The *Īśa Upaniṣad* (verse 1) states: "The whole universe is pervaded by the divine. Enjoy it with renunciation and do not covet what belongs to another"²³. This principle aligns with contemporary discussions on sustainable living and environmental responsibility.

As AI and genetic engineering challenge traditional ethical frameworks, Upaniṣadika thought provides insights into the ethical dimensions of technological advancements. The emphasis on dharma (righteous action) and karma (moral causality) suggests that technological progress must be aligned with the well-being of all beings. Ethical AI, which incorporates principles of fairness, transparency, and non-harm, reflects the Upaniṣadika ideal of *ahimsā* (non-violence) and *satyam* (truth)²⁴ (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.12.4).

Modern physics, particularly quantum mechanics, has drawn several parallels with Upaniṣadika philosophy. The observer effect, quantum entanglement, and wave-particle duality resonate with the Upaniṣadika understanding of an interdependent cosmos. The Upaniṣadika view that reality is shaped by perception is echoed in the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, which suggests that a quantum state collapses upon observation. The idea that "the knower and the known are one" (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.5.15) anticipates contemporary discussions on participatory realism in physics²⁵. Quantum entanglement, where particles remain connected across vast distances, mirrors the Upaniṣadika concept that all things are manifestations of a singular, undivided reality (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14.1). Scientists such as Amit Goswami and Fritjof Capra have explored these connections, arguing that quantum physics supports the non-dualistic worldview of the *Upaniṣads*²⁶.

The *Upaniṣads* continue to shape contemporary thought by providing a holistic framework for understanding consciousness, reality, and ethics. Their

insights are increasingly relevant in discussions on metaphysics, quantum physics, and artificial intelligence ethics. By bridging the gap between science and spirituality, Upaniṣadika teachings offer a comprehensive vision of knowledge that integrates empirical investigation with experiential wisdom. This integration may provide new directions for both philosophical inquiry and scientific exploration in the 21st century.

Conclusion

The Upaniṣads provide a significant philosophical foundation for *Sanātana* Dharma, offering an intricate synthesis of metaphysical inquiry, epistemological exploration, and ethical practice. Their emphasis on self-realization and transcendent knowledge continues to inspire contemporary thought, advocating a balanced integration of reason, intuition, and spiritual discipline. As the world grapples with materialistic reductionism, a revival of Upaniṣadika wisdom may contribute to a more holistic understanding of life and knowledge.

Sanātana Dharma, always considered to as the "eternal way," is deeply rooted in the Upaniṣads, which form the philosophical core of Hindu thought. The Upaniṣads provide a deep metaphysical, ethical, and epistemological foundation that shapes the essence of *Sanātana* Dharma. Through an in-depth exploration of Upaniṣadika wisdom, we can conclude that this ancient tradition is not merely a set of religious beliefs but a dynamic and evolving philosophical system that continues to influence spiritual and intellectual discourse.

The Upaniṣads also redefine the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). While empirical and inferential knowledge (as upheld in positivist traditions) have their place, the Upaniṣadika approach prioritizes direct experience (*aparokṣānubhūti*) as the highest form of knowledge. This experiential wisdom is gained through introspection, meditation, and self-inquiry rather than external observation alone. This epistemological shift challenges the reductionist methods of positivism and highlights the necessity of inner realization in the quest for truth.

In the modern era, where scientific rationalism and materialism dominate philosophical discourse, the Upaniṣadika foundations of *Sanātana* Dharma provide a necessary counterbalance. The Upaniṣads advocate a comprehensive epistemology that integrates reason (*yukti*), direct experience (*anubhava*), and scriptural

wisdom (*śruti*). This approach not only revamps positivist methodologies but also offers an alternative paradigm that respects both empirical inquiry and transcendental experience.

As we navigate the complexities of the modern world, the Upaniṣadika wisdom embedded in *Sanātana* Dharma serves as a guiding light, offering a timeless and transformative vision of reality. It challenges the limitations of positivist science, reaffirms the importance of inner experience, and ultimately directs humanity toward self-realization and universal harmony.

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