Does the concept of theōria fit the beginning of Indian thought?

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Is early Indian thought more interested in salvation than in truth?

In ‘Philosophy and the Crisis of the European Man’,\(^1\) while aiming at characterising the intellectual attitude of the primeval European thinkers in contradistinction with other wise men of the same time in India and China, Edmund Husserl attributes the concept of ‘philosophy’, understood as the quest for the firm basement of any future science, only to the Greek Pre-Socratics. Of course both Indian and Greek thinkers consider the universe as a whole and they try to explain it from a single principle inasmuch as it constitutes a whole. They both care about what is universal, and might have expressed true assertions about it. But, according to Husserl, the purpose of such global explanations is different on each side, and therefore Indian thinkers still belong to the so-called ‘mythical-religious’ mentality whereas only Greece reaches the pure philosophy that implies the autonomy of rational thought. With the word ‘autonomy’ Husserl does not only mean that the individual mind thinks by itself, without considering tradition or sacred revelation,\(^2\) but also and mainly that rational thought has rational goals. In Husserl’s view rationality did exist in the mythical-religious mentality of India and China, but not in a sovereign way. Only the early Greek thinkers would be concerned with the research for truth for the sake of truth. This love of truth would be independent from the benefits that the possession of truth may bring to the lover, for example immortality. Thus, thanks to the Greek starting point, the

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\(^1\) Husserl 1965: 164–6.

\(^2\) Bernabé-Mendoza (2013: 32–3) has shown that the Vedic cosmogony of RV 10.129 already claimed to be independent from any previous tradition. This relatively autonomous thinking reminds us of the Pythagorean appearance of rationality in the same realm of cosmogony. But real autonomy does not only consist in independence from tradition, as Husserl rightly noticed. The question of what purpose rationality is used to remains crucial.
discovery of truth can appear as the main task of all mankind, progressing generation by generation, step by step in infinitum. Europe would be responsible for this spiritual inheritance of a continuous progress in pure knowledge. By contrast Indian thinkers would be mainly interested in personal salvation. In India knowledge could be useful, and even necessary to escape death and every evil, but it is not the highest goal by itself and in itself. It is just a means to release the soul from the bounds of body, disease, fear and death. The evidence for such a thesis would be the fact that real philosophy, i.e. the Greek quest for the knowledge of the first principles of the universe and of thought, is born from wonder (thau-mazein), as Aristotle states in the Metaphysics A2, because to wonder implies acknowledging one’s own ignorance:

That it is not a productive science is clear from a consideration of the first philosophers. It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophise; wondering in the first place at obvious perplexities, and then by gradual progression raising questions about the greater matters too, e.g. about the changes of the moon and of the sun, about the stars and about the origin of the universe. Now he who wonders and is perplexed feels that he is ignorant (thus the myth-lover is in a sense a philosopher, since myths are composed of wonders); therefore if it was to escape ignorance that men studied philosophy, it is obvious that they pursued science for the sake of knowledge, and not for any practical utility. (Aristotle Metaphysics A2, 982b)

According to Aristotle, the common rooting in wonder makes the link between the Pre-Socratics, Plato and Aristotle, even if the doctrines about the first principle are not the same since several Pre-Socratics were materialist, as for example Thales. It brings out philosophy as a spiritual phenomenon endowed with an intrinsic unity. According to Husserl, the concept of theōria, as elaborated by Aristotle in his Nicomachean Ethics and Metaphysics, would not fit the beginning of Indian thought, although it does fit the Pre-Socratic beginning of philosophy. In Greece too, the knowledge of the highest principle produces some benefit for the knower, especially pleasure, but it is only in Greece that this external benefit is not the main motive for undertaking metaphysical researches. Moreover, pleasure supervenes on Greek theoretical activity only if pleasure is not consciously intended therein. It is only in Greece that reflection about the universe as a whole ruled by a unique principle constitutes the expression of a spiritual freedom.

Of course this thesis of Husserl is quite simplistic and in this chapter I aim at refuting it, but it is not very easy to do so because it implies a change in our views both of Greek and of Indian early philosophy. In this chapter I do not directly address the cause of the famous striking similarities between Greek and Indian early thoughts, but rather the question of the extent of these similarities. The question of their possible origin will come later.
First, let us see what seems to sustain Husserl’s view.

In the *Upaniṣads* the knower globally identifies with the object of his knowledge, or rather he realises that since the very beginning of his conscious existence he already was secretly the same thing as what he knows. Therefore he becomes himself the highest principle which constitutes the universe as a whole when he gets an intuition thereof. Such a process of identification seems to concern not only the intellect but every aspect of the person, including its body, because the highest principle may be related to the body, when it is for example breath or fire. The highest knowledge does not necessarily have a *meta*-physical object, although the highest principle is always invisible and concealed inside the human being. Therefore the presentation of the highest knowledge cohabits in the *Upaniṣads* with magic tricks and aggressive spells (see for example the *parimara* ritual, ‘death around’, of KauU 2.12) in order to get power, wealth and glory in society:

Verily, he who knows the chiefest (*jyeṣṭham*) and best (*śreṣṭham*), becomes the chiefest and best of his own [people]. Breath (*prāṇa*), verily, is chiefest and best. He who knows this becomes the chiefest and best of his own [people] and even of those of whom he wishes so to become. (BU 6.1.1)

Even the gods obtain some benefit from their knowledge of the highest principle. Indeed they are gods, endowed with immortality and universal power, just because they unite with it:

Verily, those gods who are in the brahman-world meditate upon that Self (*ātman*). Therefore all worlds and all desires have been appropriated by them. He obtains all worlds and all desires who has found out and who understands that Self. (ChU 8.12.6)

Because of its supposed power in the realm of everyday life, the highest knowledge is a useful treasure jealously kept in the circle of family and initiates, just like the family-*mandalas* of the *Ṛgveda*, which were composed and transmitted in the same real or symbolic male lineage.³ Sacred knowledge is not exhibited on the *agora* in order to be tested through a free dialogue with anybody. The process of transmission occurs generation by generation along an initiatory thread and is organised by fixed rules. It is not spread out among citizens so that each one could contribute to its indefinite development. Such a selective teaching creates both power and obligations for the recipients. These obligations consist in ritual, pedagogical and spiritual duties.

But there is a crucial difference between the knowledge of a mere magic for-

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³ *mandala* II to VII. For the same restriction of transmission concerning the Avesta, see Panaino 2003.
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mula and the Upaniṣadic highest knowledge, which is always a self-knowledge: whereas the magic formula destroys a certain evil or a certain enemy in certain circumstances, the self-knowledge releases man from every aspect of his finiteness because the self he identifies with is infinite. Such a knowledge really brings salvation. Moreover it is said that every aspect of his person is completely saved because only the part of him that identifies with his true secret self, be it intellectual or not, constitutes his real person. There is no real division between a spiritual part and a social part because one of them is unreal. The assertions concerning the glory and the power of the one ‘who knows thus’ (*ya evaṃ veda*) have to be interpreted: who is this one? Of course the visible body remains mortal but the wise man, with all its real parts, reaches immortality:

\begin{verbatim}
       akāmō dhī́ro amā́to dhvayaṁ bā́śena truptō nā kū́taś canónaḥ /
tā́m evā́ vidvā́n nā bibhā́ya mṛtyṓr ātmā́nām dhī́raṁ ājāraṁ yūvā́nam //44//
\end{verbatim}

Free from desire, wise, self-existent, satisfied with sap [ritual drink], not deficient in any respect, one is not afraid of death if one knows this wise, immortal and unaging One as oneself. (AV 10.8.44, hymn devoted to Skambha, the cosmic pillar)

The self-knowledge provides victory, but such a victory does not follow a fight against a particular enemy. It deals with a victory against everything that has a form and a name in the world. Victory here means access to an absolute transcendence:

\begin{verbatim}
       He obtains the victory of the sun, indeed, a victory higher than the victory of the sun is his, who, knowing this thus, reverences the sevenfold Sāman, measured in itself, as leading beyond death – yea, who reverences the Sāman! (ChU 2.10.6)
\end{verbatim}

This salvific function of self-knowledge in the *Upaniṣads* constitutes their real unity beyond the multiplicity of the doctrines concerning the nature of the Self. It implies that this Self is impassive even though it works as the subject of every experience, including the experience of pain. It is the light which illuminates pain, but not pain itself, and it is the same for pleasure.

\begin{verbatim}
       sū́ryo yathā́ sarvalokasya cā́kṣuḥ na lipyate cā́kaśuṣair bā́hyadoṣaiḥ /
       ekas tathā́ sarvabhaṅṭantār ā́tma na lipyate lokaduḥkhaṁ bā́hyaiḥ //11//
\end{verbatim}

As the sun, the eye of the whole world, is not sullied by the external faults of the eyes, so the one Inner Self of all things is not sullied by the evil in the world, being external to it. (KaU 5.11–12)

Therefore the specific immortality of the Self is not a merely temporal continuation of our everyday life, with its various pains and pleasures, but a sudden getting in touch with eternity. Therefore the *ātmān* is not the *bhokṛ*, the agent of enjoyment, which has preferences and aversions. For example, while Prajāpati
teaches Indra about the true nature of the self, Indra wants to obtain something enjoyable (bhogyam) and, at the beginning, he does not understand that the pure consciousness – unlike the relationship consisting in enjoying something – is not an object relationship:

‘Now, when one is sound asleep, composed, serene, and knows no dream – that is the Self (ātman)’, said he [Prajāpati]. ‘That is the immortal, the fearless. That is the brahman.’

Then with tranquil heart he [Indra] went forth.

Then, even before reaching the gods, he saw this danger: ‘Assuredly, indeed, this one does not exactly know his Self (ātmānam) with the thought “I am he”, nor indeed the things here. He becomes one who has gone to destruction. I see nothing enjoyable (bhogyam) in this.’ (ChU 8.11.1)

Thus the kind of benefits the Upaniṣadic mystic knowledge can bring are at the same time greater than any benefit that a mundane power may bring, and more abstract. Moreover these benefits are not external to knowledge since they result from the features of the very object of knowledge, that is, the Self. Here knowledge is not a mere means that one could leave once it has worked. Self-knowledge is so important that it changes life: it does not mean that it is a mere tool. The power of the old Indian self-knowledge is perhaps not as remote from the purity of the Greek theōria as Husserl thought.

**Back to Greece: searching for immortality through philosophy**

Second, Husserl’s view about the Pre-Socratics is quite idealistic. Indeed he confuses their passionate interest in knowledge with Immanuel Kant’s ethics. In the Pre-Socratics we can also find rivalry, challenge, the quest for dominion. The well-known imitation of god that we find in Plato (homoiosis tōi theōi) worked earlier as an imitation of divine power on earth. For example Empedocles praised his own wisdom inasmuch as it made him ‘immortal god instead of mortal’ (θεὸς ἄμβροτος, οὐκέτι θνητός), bringing him also glory and political success (31 DK B112). The imperishable fame provided to heroes by poets like Homer (kleos aphthiton) has echoes in such a self-narrative. Moreover Parmenides’ deity is supposed to deliver knowledge which makes the philosopher able to master the world of appearances in which he lives. Through the cosmological knowledge the philosopher can anticipate the phenomena better than other mortals and thus better survive and succeed on the political level:

τὸν σοι ἐγὼ διάκοσμον ἐοικότα πάντα φατίζω,
ὡς οὐ μή ποτὲ τίς σε βροτῶν γνώμη παρελάσση.

4 See the Sanskrit root BHUJ–, ‘to enjoy’, ‘to make use of’.
This order of things I declare to you to be likely in its entirety, in such a way that never shall any mortal outstrip you in practical judgment. (28 DK B8.60–1)

But concerning the knowledge of ‘the unmoved heart of truth’ itself, Eleaticism does not neglect its internal benefit for the soul. Being, which has to be seized by an intellectual intuition after the sensuous cognition has been refuted, stands beyond every pair of contraries including pain and pleasure, disease and health:

So then the all is eternal and infinite and homogeneous; and it could neither perish nor become greater nor change its arrangement nor suffer pain or distress. If it experienced any of these things it would no longer be one; for if it becomes different, it is necessary that being should not be homogeneous, but that which was before must perish, and that which was not must come into existence. If then the all should become different by a single hair in ten thousand years, it would perish in the whole of time. And it is impossible for its order to change, for the order existing before does not perish, nor does another which did not exist come into being; and since nothing is added to it or subtracted from it or made different, how could any of the things that are change their order? But if anything became different, its order would already have been changed. Nor does it suffer pain, for the all could not be pained since it would be impossible for anything suffering pain always to be; nor does it have power equal to the power of what is healthy. It would not be homogeneous if it suffered pain; it would suffer pain whenever anything was added or taken away, and it would no longer be homogeneous. Nor could what is healthy suffer a pang of pain, for both the healthy and being would perish, and not-being would come into existence. The same reasoning that applies to pain applies also to distress. Nor is there any void, for the void is nothing, and that which is nothing could not be. Nor does it move, for it has nowhere to go to, since it is full; for if there were a void it could go into the void, but since there is no void it has nowhere to go to. It could not be rare and dense, for it is not possible for the rare to be as full as the dense, but the rare is already more empty than the dense. (Melissus, 30 DK B7, emphasis added)

Of course, if the One is the only reality, what knows it on the one hand and, on the other hand, the One itself, cannot be different. Therefore what applies to it applies also to the soul of the perfect philosopher. This emancipation from becoming and from the various psychological affects that becoming implies clearly reminds us of Upaniṣadic salvation. The Upaniṣadic Self too stands beyond the alternation of night and day, of good and evil:

Then, just as one driving a chariot looks down upon the two chariot-wheels, thus he looks down upon day and night, thus upon good deeds and evil deeds, and upon all the pairs of opposites. This one, devoid of good deeds, devoid of evil deeds, a knower of brahman, unto very brahman goes on. (KauU 1.4)

Furthermore Husserl defines the emergence of Pre-Socratic thought as the emergence of the common project to develop knowledge of the universe in infinitum. But how could Eleatic being, which is absolutely one, give place to
a progressive and possibly infinite inquiry? Being, because of its simplicity, can only be entirely known or ignored. It is seized by an instantaneous intuition which, so to speak, immediately brings the intellect to the very middle of absolute being itself: τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι, ‘the same is to think and to be’ (Parmenides, B3). Noeîn implies a jump to a new level of experience, but it does not deal with the progressive analysis of normal empirical data. This is why such knowledge, in Greece too, can have a soteriological dimension. Our finiteness is not a fatality. Such knowledge is not the result of a previous break with the sensuous cognitions through which we act in order to save our life with its intrinsic vulnerability, but the break itself. The various metaphysical arguments about Being prove only that there is no other real object of knowledge, but they do not result in an increasingly precise knowledge of Being. Therefore Husserl’s view about progress in philosophy would better apply to the Ionian school, which addresses phusis, or to Eleatic cosmology as a mere arrangement of phenomena, but does not fit the whole Pre-Socratic movement. For example it works with just a part of Xenophanes’ thought: ‘In the beginning the gods did not at all reveal all things clearly to mortals, but by searching men in the course of time find them out better’ (21 DK B18).

The Eleatic stress on immediate intuition as the only way to know the highest principle offers another great similarity with the Upaniṣads:

pratibodhaviditaṃ matam amṛtatvaṃ hi vindate /

When it is found by intuition, it is thought: so one finds immortality. (KU 2.4a)

Of course, in Greece, the idea that this intuition of absolute reality immediately produces immortality for the soul of the wise man is not clearly expressed before Plato and Aristotle. When the soul is the subject of a certain knowledge, this knowledge can change the knowledge of which the soul is the object, because to be the subject of this very knowledge changes the soul itself: this fact is only alluded to in the Pre-Socratics. Nevertheless, we can find in the Pre-Socratics some traces of this salvific power of knowledge inasmuch as philosophy and mystery cults echo each other.

Against Husserl’s rejection of the question of salvation from the earliest Greek philosophy, let us first note that the philosophers who have elaborated the concept of pure theōria – I mean Plato in his Theaetetus and Aristotle in his Metaphysics – are exactly the same as those who claimed that this very theōria, while applying to the highest principle of reality, lets the thinking part of the soul (nous) reach a special degree of immortality, beyond space and time, whether the common soul of human beings possesses a finite or an infinite duration.⁶

⁶ Adluri-Bagchee (2012) has shown that these two levels of immortality occur in ancient Brahmanic culture. It is one more Indo-Greek parallel.
If then the intellect is something divine in comparison with man, so is the life of the intellect divine in comparison with human life. Nor ought we to obey those who enjoin that a man should have man’s thoughts and a mortal the thoughts of mortality, but we ought so far as possible to achieve immortality, and do all that man may to live in accordance with the highest thing in him; for though this be small in bulk, in power and value it far surpasses all the rest.

It may even be held that this is the true self of each, inasmuch as it is the dominant and better part; and therefore it would be a strange thing if a man should choose to live not his own life but the life of some other than himself.

Moreover what was said before will apply here also: that which is best and most pleasant for each creature is that which is proper to the nature of each; accordingly the life of the intellect is the best and the pleasantest life for man, inasmuch as the intellect more than anything else is man; therefore this life will be the happiest. (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* X, 7)

Already in Diotima’s speech Plato has established such a connection between the contemplation of the highest reality, i.e., the intelligible Form of Beauty, and the access to a peculiar immortality, not exceeding the brief moment of the intellect, different from the temporal immortality of the soul as a principle of life demonstrated in the *Phaedo* and in book X of the *Republic*:8

ή οὐκ ἐνθυμῇ, ἔφη, ὅτι ἐνταῦθα αὐτῷ μοναχοῦ γενήσεται, ὃ ρώντι ὃ ὅρατόν τοῦ καλὸν, τίκτειν ὁρῶντι ᾧ ὁρατὸν τὸ καλὸν, τίκτειν οὐκ εἰδώλα ἄρετῆς, οὕτως ἐκινδύνου ἐφαπτομένος, ὢν τῷ ἀληθείᾳ ἐφαπτομένῳ, οὐκ ἐτρεφεὶ οὐκ ἐφαπτομένῳ, τεκόν ἄρετης ἀληθής καὶ ἐκείνῳ ἀληθείᾳ τίκτειν ἀληθείᾳ καὶ τεκόντες ἀληθές εἰς ἀληθείαν ὑπάρχει ἀληθείᾳ γενέσθαι, καὶ εἰπέρ τῷ ἄλλῳ ἀθανάτῳ ἀληθείᾳ ἀθανάτῳ ἀληθείᾳ ἀληθείᾳ καὶ ἐκείνῳ;

‘Do but consider’, she said, ‘that there only will it befall him, as he sees the beautiful through that which makes it visible, to breed not illusions but true examples of virtue, since his contact is not with illusion but with truth. So when he has begotten a true virtue and has reared it up he is destined to win the friendship of the divinity and, above all men, to become immortal.’ (Symp. 212a)

Therefore it would be strange if the salvific power of the prōtē philosophia (the ‘primary philosophy’, later called ‘Metaphysics’: Aristotle *Metaphysics* E, 1026a 24) were incompatible with the freedom and the disinterestedness which define it. Furthermore, the prōtē philosophia is free from any mundane interest.

7 Unlike Sorabji (2006: 118), I do not think that the verb doxeiē means that Aristotle wanted to express some distance from the view that intellect is the true self of the man. For the view that intellectual life brings pleasure, which is typically Aristotelian, cannot be separated from the selfhood of the intellect.

8 For the immortality of the unfair and anti-philosophical soul, see Plato, *Republic* X, 610c. It is consistent with *Leges* X, where every soul is defined as a self-moving movement, and thus as a permanent movement, whatever kind of movement it gives to itself. The circular movement of intellection is only one kind among the various kinds of movement a soul can produce for itself.
just because it is a ‘twice divine’ science which implies a kind of salvation by itself: it has the autonomous divinity as its object but also as its subject (Aristotle *Metaphysics* A2), so that he who has got this science merges into divinity and so into its essential self-sufficiency and immortality inasmuch as he knows. Deity is not a slave, even of its own needs, because it has no need. Therefore spiritual divinisation is the condition of disinterestedness. Subsequently the intellective knowledge of the first principles is not a mere means to gain immortality, a means that one could leave once the goal is reached. This knowledge produces immortality when it is desired for itself, just like it produces pleasure, I mean like youth produces the flower according to Aristotle’s very words. Indeed immortality is not an effect of the intellective knowledge, standing outside this knowledge, but just a way to express the fact that such a knowledge gets in touch with what is universal and necessary. Theoretical immortality is not something more which would be added to the normal existence. It is not a ‘plus’. It concerns the level of being, but not the level of having. This is why Greek immortalisation through and in philosophy consists in focusing on oneself, if the self is correctly understood: the intellect is the very self of man, the man of the man so to speak, as Plato shows in the theriomorphic allegory of the soul which is to be found at the end of the *Republic*.9

Second, in the Pre-Socratics knowledge appears as endowed with a salvific dimension only when its transmission takes on the form of an initiatory revelation reflecting mystery cults. For example, Empedocles seems to use the vocabulary of the mysteries10 in order to describe the destiny of wise men. Their intellectual virtue is supposed make them equal to the gods. They will share the table of the gods,

eἰς δὲ τέλος μάντεις τε καὶ ὑμνοπόλοι καὶ ἱηροί
καὶ πρόμοι ἀνθρώπων ἐπέστησαν τοῖς θεοῖς,
ἐνθὲν οἱ τιμῆισι περίγονα).

ἀθανάτοις ἄλλοσιν ὡς ὁμόσιοι,
κατασχέταις ἀνδρείων ἀφόροι,
ἀτειρεῖς.

9 See Plato *Republic* IX, 588d. Sorabji (2006: 116–17) correctly underlines Plato’s view that the intellect is the true self of the man, but he does not clearly distinguish the two kinds of immortality that Plato considers. Of course the relation between these two ways to escape our bodily finiteness is very problematic, but an afterlife of pure thinking (see Sorabji 2006: 314) is not the only Platonic afterlife. Indeed the immortality of pure thinking can begin right now and has not to wait for any afterlife, even if it can develop better in the afterlife. The intellect is the true self of the man, so that any kind of human immortality must concern the intellect, but the problem is that some intellects are not faithful to their true nature and give up thinking.

10 For a compelling demonstration of the narrative and stylistic parallels between Empedocles and the Orphic gold tablets, see Herrero de Jáuregui 2013: 31–55.
Finally they come among earthborn humans as soothsayers, poets, physicians and war chiefs. Hence they rise up as gods full of honours, sharing the hearth and the table of the other immortals, taking part neither in the sorrows of men nor in tiredness. (B146–7)

This privilege looks like the privilege of ‘the ritually pure men’ according to some writings attributed to Musaeus and his son Eumolpus by the itinerant Orphic priests.11 Such an elevation put an end to the exile of the daimon from its original divine condition. Since the similar knows the similar, philosophical knowledge is a way to restore the primeval unity of the sphairos (the divine and homogeneous mass of being constituting the first step in Empedocles’ cosmogony [B29]), which has been disturbed, at the individual level, by a voluntary ritual fault (to sacrifice animals, see B115). Universal knowledge reintroduced Love into the microcosm. Therefore to understand Empedocles’ lesson guarantees salvation, even if the macrocosm remains under the common influence of Love and Strife.

Other allusions could be found in Parmenides, Heraclitus and in the Derveni Papyrus.12 But they are only allusions. The Hinterwelt, in the sense of Nietzsche, relies on a Hintertext: the modern reader has to insert the fragments into a web of symbols and similes that are not directly included in the text in order to show the immortalising dimension of the personal practice of philosophy.

Nevertheless, in Greece as well as in India, there is an analogy between ritual knowledge and knowledge of the highest principle of the universe inasmuch as both aim at immortalising men and both are reserved for the happy few; in both cases the analogy reveals a concealed but essential aspect of what is compared. But the dynamic of the comparison is inverted between these cultures. What is obvious and superficial on one side is obscure and essential on the other side and reciprocally. In the Veda immortalising knowledge first appears as ritual knowledge, but then it must disclose itself as knowledge of the highest principle of the universe in order to reach its actual goal, which is the immortalisation of the individual. This transformation is possible only inasmuch as the elements of rites – thoughts, words, actions – are viewed as real things, existing by themselves forever, but not as peculiar cultural manifestations. Progressively the ritual injunctions appear as the true laws of nature and the inquiry about the real meaning of ritual acts, while obtaining the immortalising value of the external practice of the ritual itself, becomes a global attempt to give sense to the whole cosmos. The immortalising activity becomes an intellectual one. Between the

11 About the συμπόσιον τῶν ὁσίων in Hades according to the Orphic tradition, see Plato, Republic II, 363c.
beginning and the end of this process the form of transmission remains the same: oral, esoteric and finally intuitive.

Now in Greece the knowledge of the first principle is initially positive and public. But it must disclose itself as bearing the same form as certain ritual knowledge – that is, the secret knowledge imparted in mystery cults – in order to take over its immortalising power. The prōtē philosophia can evolve thus inasmuch as, on the one hand, mystery cults, by consisting of the re-enactment of an archetypical gesture, are for the soul a way to reintegrate its divine origin, and, on the other hand, the intuitive knowledge of the first principle implies a merging of the ego with the principle itself. This slow transformation is not necessarily and mainly chronological: rather it deals with an exegetical dialectic going deeper and deeper.

Wonder and love of truth in the Upaniṣads

Just like the Pre-Socratics, the Upaniṣads claim that the mystic knowledge, inasmuch as it brings out immortality, has to be understood in the perspective of a dialogue with the ritual tradition because the ritual tradition also faces our finiteness. There is a rivalry between two kinds of immortalising knowledge. In the older stratum of the Vedas, the Brāhmaṇas intended to let the ‘sacrificer’ (yajamāna) reach ‘immortality by means of what is mortal’, that is by sacrificial victims correctly laid out in space and time (martyenāmrtaṃ īpsaty, AiĀ II, 3, 2). The knowledge presented in the Brāhmaṇas is supposed to point out the correct actions to be done in order to become immortal. Such a knowledge has a practical value but it is not immediately immortalising by itself. It just supplies a pattern for the crucial deed. By contrast Upaniṣadic wisdom has to be immediately immortalising by itself, and so cannot work as a mere means.

Finally the desire for truth for the sake of truth and the wonder really play a crucial part also in the Upaniṣads, maybe even more so than in Greece.

First, there is a real worrying about the essence and the definition of the Self (ātman), not only about its power. The Greek ti esti question (‘what is it?’), so simportant in Plato and Aristotle, has echoes in this ChU passage:

Prācīnaśāla Aupamanyava, Satyayajña Paulushi, Indradyumna Bhāllaveya, Jana Śārkarākshya and Buḍila Āśvatarāśvi – these great householders, greatly learned in sacred lore (śrotriya), having come together, pondered: ‘What is our Self? What is the brahman (ko na ātmā kim brahma)?’ (ChU 5.11.1)

13 For the connection between this question and the intelligible Forms, see Plato, Timaeus, 50b 1: the sensible qualities inscribed in the chōra cannot work as a satisfying answer to the question ‘what is it?’ This question fits only intelligible Forms if some specification is expected.
14 See for example Aristotle, Metaphysics 1026a 4.
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But in India this question does not receive any definitive answer because the ātman is even stranger than what it is supposed to explain. In the Vedas there is a real wonder about natural phenomena, but the most wonderful thing is the paradoxical nature of the Self which offends the law of non-contradiction:

\[\text{kathāṃ vā́ to nélayati kathāṃ nā ramate mānaḥ } / \text{kīm āpāh satyām prépsantīr nélayanti kadā canā //37//}\\ \text{mahād yakṣāṃ bhūvanasya mádhye tāpasi krāntām salilāsyā prṛṭhē } / \text{tāśmin chrayante yā u ké ca devā vrksāsyä skándhāḥ parīta ivā śākāḥ //38//}

How is it possible that the wind does not cease? How is it possible that the mind does not rest? Why do the Waters, seeking to attain truth, at no time so ever cease? *The great marvel in the midst of nature* (mahād yakṣāṃ bhūvanasya mádhye) strode in penance on the back of the Ocean – in it are set whatever gods there are, like branches of a tree roundabout the trunk. (AV 10.7.37–8, to Skambha, the cosmic pillar, emphasis added)

The syntagma *mahād yakṣāṃ bhūvanasya mádhye* occurs elsewhere in a similar context, while alluding again to the chief principle of all the world:

\[\text{dūrē pūrṇēna vasati dūrā ūnēna hīyate } / \text{mahād yakṣāṃ bʰūvanasya mádʰye tāśmai baliṁ rāṣṭrabʰŕ̥to bʰaranti //15//}\\ \text{In the distance it dwells with the fullness, in the distance it is devoid of deficiency – the great marvel in the midst of nature: to it the kingdom-bearers bear tribute. (AV 10.8.15, to Skambha, the cosmic pillar, emphasis added)}

The word *yakṣa* itself (‘marvel’) is connected with the *brahman* in the *Upaniṣads*. The *brahman* is superior even to the gods to whom it grants immortality, so that it goes beyond their understanding. When the *brahman* directly appears the gods must acknowledge their inferiority:

\[\text{brahma ha devebhyo vijigye / tasya ha brahmaṃo vijaye devā amahīyanta / ta aikṣantāsmākam evāyam vijayo ‘smākam evāyam mahīmeti /}\\ \text{tad dhaiṣāṃ vijajñāu / tebhyo ha prādur babhūva / tan na vyajānata kim idam yaksam iti . . .}

Now, the brahman won a victory for the gods. Now, in the victory of this brahman the gods were exulting. They bethought themselves: ‘Ours indeed is this victory! Ours indeed is this greatness!’

Now, It understood this of them. It appeared to them. They did not understand It. ‘What wonderful being (*yakṣa*) is this?’ they said. They said to Agni (Fire): ‘Jātavedas, find out this – what this wonderful being is.’ ‘So be it.’ (KU 3.1–2)

The chief principle of all the world is a ‘marvel’ because, like a riddle, it offends the law of non-contradiction. It can contain contraries because it stands beyond:
The full from the full he bends up; the full is poured with the full; also that may we know today, whence that is poured out. (AV 8.29, to Skambha, the cosmic pillar)

What stirs, flies, and what stands, and what is breathing, not breathing, winking— that, all-formed, sustains the earth; that, combining, becomes the One. (AV 10.8.11, to Skambha, the cosmic pillar)

Since contradiction belongs to the very nature of the chief principle, human wonder is not destined to disappear with the reaching of ultimate knowledge, but to become more and more intensive. The search is to be continued. Therefore Prajāpati as cosmic god is sometimes called ‘Who’ by name (Ka), when he [?] has his anirukta (‘unarticulated’) form, which is the primeval one. His very essence is a perpetual question, asked by himself. This permanent wondering is just the contrary of what Aristotle attributes to the course of metaphysical research:

The acquisition of this knowledge, however, must in a sense result in something which is the reverse of the outlook with which we first approached the inquiry. All begin, as we have said, by wondering that things should be as they are, e.g. with regard to marionettes, or the solstices, or the incommensurability of the diagonal of a square; because it seems wonderful to everyone who has not yet perceived the cause that a thing should not be measurable by the smallest unit. But we must end with the contrary and (according to the proverb) the better view, as men do even in these cases when they understand them; for a geometrician would wonder at nothing so much as if the diagonal were to become measurable. (Aristotle *Metaphysica* A2, 983a 11–20)

Therefore the desire for mystical knowledge does not cease when the knowledge is obtained. The desire for truth and the possession of truth cannot be contrasted, whereas Aristotle said that the stable possession of the truth was better than researching the truth. Vedic contemplation is active, although it does not deal with the consumption relationship expressed by the Sanskrit root BHUJ-. Thus the Self himself is said to love truth just like the mystical ascetic.

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15 See TB II, 2, 10.60–1. See also AiB XII, 10, 1: *aham etat asāni yat tvam aham mahān asānīti / sa prajāpatir abraviḍ atha ko ’ham iti yad eva etad avoca ity abraviḍ / tato vai ko nāma prajāpatir abhavat* (‘[Indra:] “I want to be what you are, I want to be great!”’ Then Prajāpati answered: “Who [shall] I [be]?” [Indra] said: “Just what you uttered!” Therefore Prajāpati truly became Who by name.’) Commented by Gonda 1985.

Satyakāma is both a name of the ultimate ātman and the name of a wisdom hero, beyond all the social proprieties and all varṇa-laws:

Once upon a time Satyakāma Jābāla addressed his mother Jabālā: ‘Madam! I desire to live the life of a student of sacred knowledge. Of what family, pray, am I?’ Then she said to him: ‘I do not know this, my dear – of what family you are. In my youth, when I went about a great deal serving as a maid, I got you. So I do not know of what family you are. However, I am Jabālā by name; you are Satyakāma by name. So you may speak of yourself as Satyakāma Jābāla.’ Then he went to Hāridrumata Gautama, and said: ‘I will live the life of a student of sacred knowledge. I will become a pupil of yours, Sir.’ To him he then said: ‘Of what family, pray, are you, my dear?’ Then he said: ‘I do not know this, Sir, of what family I am. I asked my mother. She answered me: “In my youth, when I went about a great deal serving as a maid, I got you. So I do not know this, of what family you are. However, I am Jabālā by name; you are Satyakāma by name.” So I am Satyakāma Jābāla, Sir.’ To him he then said: ‘A non-brahman (a-brāhmaṇa) would not be able to explain thus. Bring the fuel, my dear. I will receive you as a pupil. You have not deviated from the truth (satya).’

(ChU 4.4.1–5, emphasis added)

And now satyakāma as an epitheton:

\[ ya \ \text{ātṁā} \ \text{apahatapāmpā} \ \text{vijaro} \ \text{vimṛtyur} \ \text{viśoko} \ \text{vijigʰatso} \ \text{pipāsaḥ} \ \text{satyakāmaḥ} \ \text{sat-}\ yasamkalpah \ \text{so} \ \text{̱nvēṣṭavyah} \ \text{sa} \ \text{vijijhāśitavyah} / \]

‘The Self (ātman), which is free from evil, ageless, deathless, sorrowless, hungerless, thirstless, whose [object of] desire is the truth (satyakāma), whose conception is the truth – He should be searched out, Him one should desire to understand. He obtains all worlds and all desires who has found out and who understands that Self.’

Thus spake Prajāpati. (ChU 8.7.1, emphasis added)

Of course, if the mystic knowledge is an identification process, the ātman as highest object of knowledge must bear in itself the desire of the knower for truth. Furthermore the ātman is satya (KauU 5). Therefore the absolute reality has to be defined as dynamic self-love. The self is what it is just because it is determined by this reflective process. The Self is not a dead thing:

\[ \text{tad dha} \ \text{tadvanam nāma} / \ \text{tadvanam ity} \ \text{upāsitavya} \ \text{sa} \ \text{ya} \ \text{etad eva} \ \text{vedābhī} \ \text{hainam} \ \text{sarvān} \ \text{bhūtāni} \ \text{saṁvaśc} \ \text{hant} / \]

It (the brahman) is Desire-of-it by name (tadvana).\(^{17}\) As ‘Desire-of-it’ it should be worshiped. For him who knows it thus, all beings together yearn. (KU 4.6)

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\(^{17}\) The compound tadvana is difficult for several reasons. How should we understand the relationship between its two parts? Here I do not follow Hume’s translation (‘It-is-the-Desire’) and I take the proper name tadvana as a tapavorśa because elsewhere the ātman is qualified with the bahūvṛhi satyakāma (ChU 8.7.1) which obviously means ‘who has the truth as an object of desire’. The second difficulty is the word vana-. It seems to rely on the Ṛgvedic
Thus ultimate knowledge, inasmuch as it is knowledge of the Self by the Self, consists in a certain internal behaviour defined by its intrinsic quality, but not in the specification of an object distinguished from other possible objects. It is expressed by the negation of the principle of excluded middle: ‘It is other than the known, and other than the unknown’ (KU 1.3). The Self is desire of desire, *in infinitum*: the desire of desire is desire for its own self, but the self is desire, so the circle is closed. Such a circle is more important than the starting point and the arrival point.

Now we can distinguish the authentic disinterestedness of the theoretical attitude which belongs to philosophy and the negation of selfhood. There is no real negation of selfhood in philosophy:

Then spake Maitreyī: ‘What should I do with that through which I may not be immortal? What you know, Sir – that, indeed, explain to me.’ Then spake Yājñavalkya: ‘Though, verily, you, my lady, were dear to us, you have increased your dearness. Behold, then, lady, I will explain it to you. But, while I am expounding, do you seek to ponder thereon.’ Then spake he: ‘Lo, verily, not for love of the husband is a husband dear, but for love of the Self (*ātman*) a husband is dear. Lo, verily, not for love of the wife is a wife dear, but for love of the Self a wife is dear. Lo, verily, not for love of the sons are sons dear, but for love of the Self sons are dear. Lo, verily, not for love of the wealth is wealth dear, but for love of the Self wealth is dear. Lo, verily, not for love of the cattle are cattle dear, but for love of the Self cattle are dear. Lo, verily, not for love of Brahmanhood is Brahmanhood dear, but for love of the Self Brahmanhood is dear. Lo, verily, not for love of Kṣatrahood is Kṣatrahood dear, but for love of the Self Kṣatrahood is dear. Lo, verily, not for love of the worlds are the worlds dear, but for love of the Self the worlds are dear. Lo, verily, not for love of the gods are the gods dear, but for love of the Self the gods are dear. Lo, verily, not for love of the Vedas are the Vedas dear, but for love of the Self the Vedas are dear. Lo, verily, not for love of the beings (*bhūta*) are beings dear, but for love of the Self beings are dear. Lo, verily, not for love of all is all dear, but for love of the Self all is dear. Lo, verily, it is the Self (*ātman*) that should be seen, that should be hearkened to, that should be thought on, that should be pondered on, O Maitreyī. Lo, verily, in the Self’s being seen, hearkened to, thought on, understood, this worldall is known. (BU 6.4.4–6)

This text does not prove the impossibility of disinterestedness in human activities. But if the theoretical attitude brings us in touch with the absolute reality, and if this absolute reality is self-desire, the theoretical attitude implies the love of oneself inasmuch as the core of the person is nothing individual but the noun *vánas*-, ‘desire’, but it is a hapax. But the whole compound might imply a pun on *tattva*- (‘reality’), which is well attested concerning the brahman (see for example KaU 6.12–13).
most universal power. Therefore the cult of selfhood typical for Indian philosoph- ophy is very different from a restricted selfishness, and the disinterestedness of the theoretical attitude cannot be restricted only to Greek thought. Husserl was wrong to do so.