

## **The Nature of Self / Soul in Existentialism and Hindu Philosophical Systems : A Brief Comparative Estimate**

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**Abstract:** This paper is on comparative estimate of Existentialism and Hindu philosophical systems. The central import of Existentialism may be stated in the dictum: 'Existence precedes Essence'. That is, according to Existentialism, man's existence is prior to his essence. Essence is derived from existence. The essence of a man may be described as what he is in terms of the totality of his properties. But existence is the act by which he is, what he is. Again essence is a concept which can be known from without; but existence is not a concept and cannot be known from outside. Man's existence is a basic act of becoming, whereas his essence is what he becomes. Man first exists and only afterwards the question of his essence comes into question. Like Existentialism, the Hindu philosophical systems enquire into the structure of human existence, its potentialities and limitations, as also its ethical interests. They are interested in analyzing such fundamental questions as: Who am I? What is my real nature? How am I related to the things of the world outside? What is my goal? Etc. If Existentialism is defined as an enquiry into the conditions and nature of human freedom, then also the Hindu philosophical systems fit in, as they end up in the intense search for human freedom. Like Existentialism, they make a distinction between authentic (original) and inauthentic (fallen state or bondage) existence. If the inauthentic existence is marked by ignorance of man's highest potentiality of being, authentic existence consists in a deliberate attempt, to liberate oneself from the fallen state, otherwise called *Samsāra*.

**Keywords :** Existential dilemma, Self/Soul as active, fallen state, essence

1

This paper may well be begun with a brief account of Existentialism. The central import of Existentialism may be stated in the dictum: 'Existence precedes Essence'. That is, according to Existentialism, man's existence is prior to his essence. Essence is derived from existence. The essence of a man may be described as what he is in terms of the totality of his properties. But existence is the act by which he is, what he is. Again essence is a concept which can be known from without; but existence is not a concept and cannot be known from outside. Man's existence is a basic act of becoming, whereas his essence is what he becomes. Man first exists and only

afterwards the question of his essence comes into question<sup>1</sup>. He exists even before he knows. Thus according to Existentialism, knowledge is a function of Being. Descartes' dictum: "I Think, therefore I am" is not agreeable to the existentialist. He would simply reverse the statement and say 'I am, therefore I think'. Man's existence is not a matter of speculation but a living reality. Here existence does not simply mean bodily presence of biological vitality but a specific capacity to cognize himself as a unique centre of freedom and activity. The true human individual should realize that he is a unique particular with a sense of responsibility. Thus human existence is the starting point as well as the ground of all philosophizing.

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Both Existentialism and the Hindu philosophical systems are interested in reacting to the persistent problems of life, which arise as a result of the direct encounter of the human individual with concrete human situations. Both are intensely occupied in finding out solutions to life-problems.

## 2

It is general feature of the Hindu philosophical systems that they all accept the undeniable existence of the self. Freedom from the cycle of birth and death, that is freedom from all empirical limitations and suffering is the summum bonum of all Hindu philosophical systems. Each system of Hindu Philosophy helps in accomplishing this philosophic goal, revealing to him the nature of ultimate reality and its place in the universe. It is an undeniable fact that freedom is impossible without the acquisition of the true knowledge of self and hence all the Hindu philosophical systems are absorbed in enquiring into the nature of self.

## 3

Now we shall analyze the existential orientation of the self in Hindu Philosophical systems.

Sāṅkhya is the oldest school of the philosophy of self.

It lays a definite emphasis on the reality of the indissoluble self. The self that is accepted by Sāṃkhya-Yoga is a pure objectless conscious subject. That is, it is pure consciousness without the distinctions of the knower and the object of knowledge. It is passive bereft of all activity and content and is a mere looker-on (*Sākṣī*). It is many. It is simple. The self posited by Sāṃkhya, in its original status, transcends the distinction of matter and mind.

Thus, Sāṃkhya-Yoga posits the existence of a transcendent consciousness called *puruṣa* or 'I' which is the basis of its empirical consciousness. The empirical consciousness is always the consciousness of mind verses matter. Thus it is dichotomas. Sāṃkhya-Yoga interprets, this dichotomas consciousness is alien to the true nature of *puruṣa*. It is a subjective- objective reality.

The external material world is accepted by Sāṃkhya-Yoga, without any doubt. The source of the external world is called *prakṛti*. Sāṃkhya-Yoga postualates the dichotomy between *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*. Both are real, infinite and independent. *Puruṣa* is simple but *prakṛti* is complex. *Puruṣas* are many but *prakṛti* is one; *puruṣa* is sentient (*Cetana*) and passive, while *prakṛti* is insentient, and active. But *puruṣa* is contradictory in nature (*svabhāva*) to *vyākta padārthas* (like *mahat* etc.) and *avyākta padarthatas* (unmanifest-*Prakṛti*)<sup>2</sup>. *Prakṛti* is constituted of three *guṇas*—*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. They are said to be in a state of equilibrium (*Sāmyāvasthā*). This state of poise gets disturbed, due to the proximity (*Sannidhi*) of *Puruṣa*. And *Prakṛti* evolves into varied objects of the world and the instruments of cognition. What is this *sannidhi* Sāṃkhya talks of? Certainly it is not spatial proximity, for *puruṣa* being infinite is always proximate to *prakṛti*. *Sannidhi* is to be rightly interpreted as the fitness of *puruṣa* in being eligible for the enjoyment (*bhoga*) and the result is liberation (*apavarga*). Thus according to Sāṃkhya, *Prakṛti* though insentient evolves into the manifold things of the universe with a primary purpose of providing *bhoga* and the consequent liberation. In short, according to Sāṃkhya-Yoga *puruṣa* is the final cause and *prakṛti* is the material cause of the universe. The early Sāṃkhya sees no need to postulate *Īśvara* (God) and the evolution of *Prakṛti* is simple and naturalistic.

However, in the later Sāṃkhya, need for the presence of *Īśvara* is very much felt. Patañjali being himself on Samkhya metaphysics, finds a place for *Isvara* in his Yoga philosophy. Yet there is no threat to the duality of Sāṃkhya metaphysics inasmuch as Patañjali's God is neither a creator of the universe nor its prime-mover but just a benevolent preceptor of infinite compassion for the selves in bondage.

Now there is a problem as to how the passive indifferent *puruṣa* comes to have knowledge of experience. Sāṃkhya's answer is : through the reflection of *puruṣa* in *buddhi* which is subtle in nature. Owing to this reflection of *puruṣa* in *buddhi* which is primarily *sāttvic*, there occurs

non-discrimination between purusa and prakṛti resulting in the mutual superimposition of the attributes of one on the other. Thus the passive purusa comes to be viewed as active, the insentient prakṛti as sentient and so on.

Thus it is this reflective union that accounts for the empirical status of purusa. It is this empirical purusa that gets enmeshed into the bonds of prakṛti and hence requires to be emancipated. But Sāṃkhya does not limit the self to this empirical consciousness. According to it, for transcendental purusa, there is neither bondage nor release in as much as purusa is just a witness (*sākṣī*) and non-doer (*akartā*) and hence eternally liberated. Purusa may be looked upon as a passive experient and not a real enjoyer as mind cannot be said to belong to purusa. Thus the emancipation of purusa, called *apavarga* consists not in the attainment of any positive bliss but only in the stoppage of suffering. Thus purusa's *bhoga* provided by prakṛti, leads him to emancipation. This is the ethical aspect of Sāṃkhya-yoga.

Thus Sāṃkhya-yoga distinguishes between the transcendent self (the transcendental 'I', free and unaffected– the ideal status of purusa) and the empirical self ( an apparently affected purusa empirically conscious due to modifications of *buddhi* the actual state). There is a plurality of transcendental purusas and Sāṃkhya being a realistic system, there is no room in it for illusion. The prakṛti and its activities are real and they pave the way for *puruṣa*'s emancipation. In this respect, Sāṃkhya-Yoga differs from advaita which conceives of prakṛti as an illusory manifestation. God, according to Patañjali is an ever-liberated soul, distinct from both *puruṣa* and prakṛti.

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Just as Sāṃkhya-Yoga, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika also accepts the plurality of souls but with the difference that it postulates the plurality of atoms (*paramāṇus*) instead of prakṛti. *Īśvara* and *adr̥ṣṭa* are two more philosophic entities that it adds to the list of its metaphysical frame-work. According to it, all the four-souls, atoms, God and *adr̥ṣṭa* are equally necessary for a satisfactory explanation of the universe. The world of objects exists for the enjoyment of souls.

Atoms may be looked upon as the material cause of the universe, as every thing in the world except atman is made out of atoms. *Adr̥ṣṭa* is another name for the blind material force of the acquired dispositions of every individual self. Its function is to bring about motion into atoms, so as to manifest objects of enjoyment for the souls. It is under the direct guidance and supervision of *Īśvara*, Who just presides over the manifestation of objects of enjoyments for the souls, in accordance with the *adr̥ṣṭa* of each individual soul. The difference in objects, both qualitatively and quantitatively is thus due to the principle of *adr̥ṣṭa*. The atoms, the souls and the principle of

adr̥ṣṭa are as eternal as *Īśvara*. *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* is very clear in pointing out that *Īśvara* is not the creator of either the souls or the atoms, though He is the operative cause of the universe.

Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika seeks to prove the existence of the soul by intuition, as manifest in the statements ‘I know’, ‘I will’ etc. In fact, according to Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, the soul is directly perceived in conjunction with the mind. Furthermore, the term ‘I’ is not applied to any other thing except the soul.<sup>3</sup> The soul is thus the object of inner perception.

Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika also tries to establish the existence of the soul on the basis of inference.<sup>4</sup> The existence of the soul can be inferred on the basis of cognition of external marks. For instance, ascending life-breath (*Prāna*), descending life-breath (*apāna*), closing of eye-lids (*nimeṣa*), opening of eye-lids (*animeṣa*) etc.

The soul according to Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, is different from the body, the external senses, the mind and God. The ‘I’ or ‘Soul’ perceived in intuition, cannot be equated with the body in as much as the body could not have been intuited when the eyes are closed. Senses are instruments used by the soul and hence the soul is not the same as senses but different from them. Again, the Soul cannot be equated with the mind, for soul is always the conceiver and the mind is the instrument of conceiving.<sup>5</sup>

Again, the soul according to Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika is not the same as God. For bliss is God’s eternal attribute, whereas the attributes of soul like knowledge, volition etc. are all limited and changing. Further pain, which is an attribute of soul, can never be attributed to God in any sense. In short, if God is Paramatman, the soul is Jivatman.

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika proceeds to establish the plurality of souls on the basis of inference and analogy. For instance, bodily movements in others. The bodily movements of mine are similar to the bodily movements of others. I have a soul and therefore others also have souls. Hence there exists the plurality of souls<sup>6</sup>. Again, because there is difference in the experience or knowledge of different persons, there should exist the plurality of souls<sup>7</sup>.

The soul according to Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika is a permanent spiritual entity and has qualities, like love (*rāga*), aversion (*dveṣa*), pleasure (*sukha*), pain (*duḥkha*), consciousness (*jñāna*), effort (*prayatna*), merit (*dharma*), *adharma* (*demerit*), mental disposition (*bhāvanā* or *saṃskāra*). These qualities would be impossible, if there were no permanent souls — contends Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika<sup>8</sup>. These qualities are related to soul as properties to a substance. Knowledge or consciousness belongs to the soul and not to anything other than the soul as its property. Since consciousness is a property, it cannot exist independently and must always belong to some support. That support to which it belongs according to Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, is the atman. Again consciousness

cannot be said to inhere in the mind or sense organs, since all these are only instruments of conceiving. And it is quite obvious that consciousness cannot be regarded as the property of the body.

Though consciousness or knowledge is a quality of soul, it is not, according to Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, a permanent quality. This is peculiar to Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika. Consciousness in the soul lasts so long as the soul is in conjunction with the mind and the sense organs and disappears with the cessation of this conjunction. In short knowledge or consciousness, is only an adventitious quality (*agantuka dharma*) of the soul and not its native or essential attribute.

As long as the soul is in union with mind, sense organs and empirical objects, so long it is said to be in bondage. The moment this union breaks, the soul attains liberation (*mokṣa*). The liberated soul in other words is described by Nyaya-Vaisesika as 'unconscious'. It is bereft of all the nine qualities like consciousness, love, aversion pleasure, pain etc (*navaguṇarahitaātmā*). Since the soul is essentially unconscious, it could be in no way self luminous (*svayamprakāśa*).

According to Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, only true knowledge can liberate the bound soul. True knowledge consists in differentiating the knowledge of the world (which is made out of atoms) from the knowledge of soul. Since everything in the world is intermixed with pain, the wise should give up all attachments to life and in this process the soul becomes 'free'. *Mokṣa*, according to Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, is a negative state in the sense that it is just free from all pain. However it is not a state of eternal bliss. At the same time Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, recognizes the existence of a supreme intelligent principle viz., *Īśvara* and elevates it to meta-physical status.

Self/Soul in Purva Mīmāṃsā as per the two schools of Kumārila and Prabhākara, is all-pervading and eternal. It is directly cognized by **manas**. Self is conceived here as both the subject and object. It is subject because it **knows**; it is object in so far as it is **known**. '**I know myself**' is a familiar form of experience. Soul/self is active unlike the Advaita view of self. At no time it feels that it is not; existence of the self is prior and essence later.

5

The Bhagavad-Gītā pictures Arjuna not as a pure theoretician but as one who is caught up in an existential crisis. He is called upon to make a choice between 'waging war' and 'desisting from war'. It is an existential choice to be made by Arjuna not sitting in an easy chair, but as involving himself in a deep crisis, on the field of action. Thus in the Bhagavad-Gītā, we find the existential orientation of philosophical enquiry and it gives an existential call to uphold one's duty.

Similarly the Upaniṣads are replete with discrete existential decisions to be taken by the

human individual in the context of a concrete human situation. The whole philosophy of Kāṭha Upaniṣad, in fact may be looked upon as an existential oriented philosophy of life, wherein young Naciketa is asked to make on existential choice between what is good (*Śreyas*) and what is merely pleasant (*preyas*). In this sense the Upanisadic philosophy of Existentialism may be taken as essentially ethical.

6

According to Śāṅkara, atman is prior to all means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*) and is self-certain. It is not a product of intellectual thinking. The very act of denying it, implies its affirmation<sup>9</sup>.

The soul in its purity, otherwise called Brahman, according to Advaita, is the ultimate Reality, which when associates itself with adjuncts like *antaḥkaraṇa* etc comes to be viewed as the individual self (*jivatman*). The empirical self is thus *avabhāsa* (appearance) of the ultimate reality viz Brahman.

Like the Existentialist, Śāṅkara would say that the empirical self should, strive to wither away all its ego-centric limitations in the experience of nothingness, if it is to emerge into its original form as pure consciousness. Nothingness for all Hindu philosophical systems, is not so much a concept or a category but an experiential reality felt in *duḥkha*. Like the Heideggerian dread, the Hindu concept of *duḥkha* reveals the inlaid nothingness of the world.

7

Like the Existentialist, Rāmānuja affirms that the chief characteristics of the self or atman is its inwardness<sup>10</sup>. It cannot be exteriorized.

According to Rāmānuja the self, though finite has a distinct existence of its own and is locus of experience within the infinite. It is inseparably connected with *Īsvara* and is dependent on him for sustenance and function. In the view of Rāmānuja, consciousness is both the essence of the self and its attribute. As attribute, it is called *dharmabhūtajñāna*. It is, unlike Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, a permanent attribute of the self. It has two-fold status-changing and unchanging. ‘Changing’ represents empirical modifications and unchanging denotes limitless consciousness. In its empirical condition, the self’s consciousness gets contracted due to *karma* and hence it undergoes all sorts of limitations and suffering. Thus according to Rāmānuja’s beginningless *karma* is the cause of bondage of the self. In the state of *mokṣa* attained through intense love of God (*bhakti*), the self acquires fullest knowledge and bliss on par with *Īsvara*. Yet it never ceases to be a centre of experience.<sup>11</sup> The liberated soul though equal to God in its knowledge and bliss, cannot be the creator of the world (*jagatpati*) and also cannot be the lord of Lakṣmi (*Lakṣmipati*) Rāmānuja

emphatically asserts. However all the liberated souls are of the same perfection and enjoy same bliss.

8

According to Madhva, self is a self-conscious subject of experience. Consciousness belongs eternally and permanently to the soul and both the soul and consciousness are self-luminous. In the view of Madhva, each soul has its own distinct' existence as distinguished from both *Īsvara* and other soul. The capacity (*yogyatā*) for perfection of one soul is not the same as the other and hence soul differ among themselves. Like the Existentialist, Madhva would emphatically say: 'I am, therefore I differ'. The very existence is radical difference. At no time and no where in his philosophy the selfhood of the self comes to be lost. It attains fuller and richer comprehension of perfection, not only by being different from *Īsvara* and the world, but also from other selves. Each soul has its won unique existence. They differ even after they are liberated from bondage and the bliss enjoyed by them varies from soul to soul.

The self in Dvaita Vedānta is finite as opposed to infinite *Īsvara*. It is dependent on *Īsvara* for its existence, knowledge and for everything. The world is a blissful gift of God for the enjoyment of souls. The self has its own *svarūpa-jñāna* that is, the knowledge which characterises it permanently and its own *vṛttijñāna*, that is the knowledge arising out of sense-object-contact. It has its own infallible internal sense organ called *sākṣī*- which reveals to the self, the knowledge of space and time. The knowledge *sākṣī* generates is free from all defects and the self comes to know about itself through *sākṣī*. Thus in Dvaita Vedānta, *Sākṣī* is not the same as self but what belongs to the self. Dvaita Vedānta does not equalise *svarūpa-jñāna* with pure consciousness, as Advaita does; for to do so is to divest the self of its distinctness and particularity; consciousness, by nature is of the nature of attribute and hence always needs a substratum or support in which it inheres.

9

In their philosophic responses to the Advaitic conception of self, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Advaita would assert that Advaita Vedānta ignores the concreteness and subjectivity of the human individual, in its attempt to abstract, exteriorize and universalize the reality as *Nirguṇa*-Brahman. Advaita Vedānta 'dissolves' the concrete individuality of the individual self in abstracting the truth thereby denying it, the distinct selfhood of the self. As a unique individual existence, the self should stand as a 'contrast' to any abstract conception of reality.

Like existentialism Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita emphasize upon the individuality, the subjectivity



and the concreteness of human existence. According to them the self is not to be reduced to the status of an 'idea' or a 'thing'. They are against exteriorizing human self and estranging its subjectivity. They are against the passive and static conception of self as advocated by Sāṃkhya and even Advaita. They also oppose the Naiyāyika conception of self as 'originally unconscious'. Such a conception of self strikes at the very root of philosophy. Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita advocate a dynamic conception of self which is at once unique, subjective and concrete.

Like Kierkegaard and Marcel, the theistic existentialists the Naiyāyikas, the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and Dvaitins believe that the true existence of the human self comes to be disclosed only through its bond with God. The Self in these systems feels 'wholebeing' not as a result of abstract logical thinking, but as a unique subjective experience. Its truth consists in its intense participation and involvement with God. The existence of self is thus an 'act' of commitment to God. The self in these systems, gets examined as an object of enquiry, without losing its specificity, concreteness and subjectivity; it is not deduced from any presupposition but is essentially, a concrete individual existence carrying in itself a sense of certainty, particularity and immediacy. Like the existentialists the self here is conceived as finite. But unlike the existentialists, the Hindu philosophical systems entertain faith in the doctrine of *karma* and rebirth. The self had a past and shall have a future. Death, the greatest form of *duḥkha* is a passing stage in human existence and not the end of life. Freedom is the inherent character of the self, which is eternal and death cannot cancel it. Freedom is only 'concealed' in the self and not 'lost'; in fact the purpose of the whole of ethical practices of Hindu Philosophical systems, is to enable the self to recognize 'freedom' as its inherent and eternal character. Thus the Hindu philosophical systems advocate transempirical state of the self which is simply dismissed by the Existentialists. The ethico-religious conception of human freedom advocated by Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita systems however are shared by Kierkegaard, Marcel and Jaspers. They point out with the existentialists that a life of pleasure-seeking ends up in boredom, melancholy, despair, a sense of vacuity, worthlessness or nothingness and estranges the human soul from God. This is inauthentic existence and real freedom consists in overcoming such a state by steadfastly binding oneself to God. One thing, however remains to be pointed out. If the existentialists adopt phenomenological method - that is analyzing the nature of world, (in which we move and have our being) as it reveals itself within human consciousness and do not go beyond that and that their language is highly emotive; the Hindu philosophers, in addition to their own thinking expressed in well defined logical terms, always seek the authority of the scripture, not dogmatically but owing to their conviction that the scriptures contain widespread and deeply felt experiences of our ancient seers, with regard to the nature of soul, world and God.

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