Methodological Interface: Indian and Greek Philosophy

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Abstract—*Philosophy is claimed having an unusually obstinate attempt to think clearly. Stated or unstated, knowingly or unknowingly, philosophers are obsessed to have thought in a certain way and have followed a definite method. Emancipation from one method and therefore having a different method has led to the emergence of different philosophical schools and individuals. "Philosophy is conceived parochially on an international scale. It is a subject that means different things to different continents, different countries, different universities and different minds. There is no one philosopher."[1] In India, the methods used by the Vedic seers and followed by Upanishadic sages involve several operative terms; such as dialogue, hermeneutic, dialectic, plurality, questioning as an enquiring act, deferring, analogies, synthesis, metaphors/aphorisms, paradoxes, etc. It has even involved such terms as mysticism and monologue. Likewise in the Greek tradition, we have dialogue, dialectic, antifoundationalism, skepticism, hermeneutics, followed by phenomenology, analytic trend, critical rationalism, polylogue, deconstruction, plurality, etc. These methods are used to understand the problems concerning the nature of Reality (natural, conceptual and social) and the place of man in that reality viewed from a definite perspective. In fact the ontological, epistemological and ethical doctrines become explicit with the help of the method that a philosopher adopts. In the present paper, I'll develop the methodological interface between Indian and Greek philosophy. It will not be possible for me to develop all the methods listed above. I'll therefore develop the method of dialogue comprehensively and have brief reflection on other methods in and around dialogue.*

Introduction: As a matter of fact, the ancient world was finite in terms of its socio-economic conditions, scientific development, historical and cultural products. The modern world is infinite in terms of ideology, scientific and technological development, logocentrism, foundationalism, essentialism, and teleology, unified world-order, rationality, conceptions of morality and justice, etc. The postmodern world has again shrunk into finite propositions in terms of anti-foundationalism, anti-essentialism and anti-teleology, fragmentation, irrationality and plurality of ethnic identities, linguistic identities, etc. In the ancient world, the Indians, the Chinese, the Greeks lived without much contact with one another and in that sense there was pluralism. But each culture regarded its principles to be universally valid. The *Rta* of the *Veda*s, the Platonic *Forms*, the *Tao* of the Chinese- all claimed to be universal. Without their knowing it, they agreed that as in the cosmos, so in the human order *Yathā pinde, tathā Brahmānde*. Or as Socrates used to say to Phaedrus: 'My dear Phaedrus, we live in cosmos, not chaos'. Today the world is one; the Greeks, the Indians, the Europeans or the Americans mingle in academia and in the market place. Modern technology has played the most important role in bringing the people to have dialogue with one another and come close to one another by means of hermeneutics.

Dialogue: The one method that has been continuously used in the different *Upanishads* as well as in early Greek philosophy is the method of **dialogue**. A dialogue is a process of conversation, argumentation and mutual supplementation of ideas between two individuals. With dialogue, a method has evolved in which the encounters with other thinkers are essential. It is just opposed to a monologue, which can formulate nothing but a dogma. The ideas I formulate to defend my standpoint must confront with other approaches, must give expression to other thinkers *as others*, and not as possible elements of a system in which I can recognize my own thought. Other thinkers must be permitted to speak as others on the same subject. I am and remain only a participant.

We come across such instances of dialogue in the Upanishads. Here the totality of moments of participation comes to be on a specific subject. Two or more than two thinkers exchange their ideas through argumentation with the aim of the *search for truth*. It is the search for truth that provides food for thought and thus thinking is stimulated. In Plato's *Theatetus*, for instance, in discussing the question of the nature of knowledge, Theaetetus advances an ostensive definition. He says that sciences like Geometry, Astronomy, Harmony and Calculation are knowledge.

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[1] Wisdom J.O., *Philosophy and Its Place in Our Culture* (*London*, Garden& Beach Science Pub. 1995), pp.1-2. One may also consult Feyeraband's *Against Method* and emancipation from method in the Postmodern discourse.

Socrates is often portrayed as seeking definition of particular excellence: courage in the *Laches* , soundness of mind in the *Charmides* , piety in the *Euthyphro* , or excellence in general in the *Meno* .The only method which is followed here is dialogue. Professing perplexity in the process of dialogue, Socrates goads another person into offering an account of an excellence, but refuses to be satisfied with examples, insisting on a general characterization that can be used to tell whether something is, indeed, an example of that excellence. When an account is offered, Socrates presses the other party with questions requiring a 'yes' or 'no' answer, and by means of inferences drawn from the statements to which the other party is committed, Socrates drives him into contradiction. Another definition may be tried, or occasionally the other party may be given a chance to change his answer to one of Socrates' questions .In either case another contradiction results and the dialogue eventually ends with the participants in the same state of perplexity as Socrates.

In a dialogue, it is the view of the other *as the other* or the *contradiction*, which is the operative term. But a dialogue is possible only when both the speakers maintain a fundamental consensus, i.e. both the speakers " (a) speak and (b) listen, (c) aim at truth (d) understand each others language (e) understand each other's way of thinking (f) and do not live in two worlds whose contents totally differ."[2] These elements prepare a meeting ground for a dialogue to be possible. As speaker, I am successful when my words elicit a response. Total silence or applause interrupts or ends my speaking. The listener who assimilates what I have said can produce an answer, which can stimulate me in return. My listener becomes speaker and *vice-versa*. Master and pupil exchange places.

In Socrates' dialogues, we thus find two characteristic features; namely, consensus and contradiction. These are the two operative terms for the possibility and development of ideas under the method of dialogue. Absolute consensus is nothing but a dogma. Absolute contradiction leads us nowhere. It is only under certain degree of consensus that certain amount of contradiction is entertained and thinking is thus stimulated. Dialogue could be regarded as the basis of hermeneutics.

We come across several dialogues in the *Upanishads*, such as, Satyakama and his mother Jabala in *Chāndogya,* Prajapati and his sons in*Brihadāranyaka*, Yama and Nachiketa, Ghora Angirasa and Krishna in *Chāndogya*, Narada and Sanat Kumar in*Chāndogya*, Prajapati, Indra and Virochana in *Chāndogya*, Swetaketu and Uddalaka in *Chāndogya*, Aruni and Swetaketu in *Chāndogya*, Yājñavalkya, Maitreyi and Katyayani in *Brihadāranyaka.* Various issues have been scrutinized according to the necessities of the discussions. The *Vedic Rishis* expressed their vision of the Absolute or the Ultimate

Reality in the form of hymns, evoking responses at the varying levels of self-realization, worshipful devotion or ritual sacrifices. The *Upanisadic* saints tried to impart the knowledge of the Absolute to his pupil through the method of a dialogue. An example of this is found in the *Brihadāranyaka Upanisad* in the dialogue between the sage Yajnavalkya and his wife Maitreyi who asks him question about the way to realize the Absolute or the ultimate Truth. As the dialogue proceeds, Yajnavalkya convinces her that it is the *Atman* or self that should be known, and when this knowledge is achieved, everything in the Universe is known, because there lies an identity between *Atman* (self) and *Brahman* (the Ultimate Reality). The five *Mahāvākyas* or great teachings (literally, Great Sentences), express this vision from different *Upanisads* in the following:

1. Prajnānām Brahma, "Consciousness is Brahman" (Aitariya Upanisad, III. 1. 3.), Aham Brahmāsmi "I am Brahman" (Brhadāranyaka Upanisad, iv. 3. 23),

2. Aham eva idam sarvosmi "I indeed am this whole Universe."

3. Tattvamasi (That Thou art), (Chandogya Upanisad, VI. 8.7.)

4. Ayam Atma Brahma "This Atman is Brahman" (Chāndogya Upanisad, iii, 10-14), Taittiriya Upanisad, i. 5., Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, II. 5. 19

5. Sarvam Khalu Idam Brahma "Everything is Brahman" (Mundaka Upanisad, iii, 13. 1., Chāndogya Upanisad, III. 14.1)

The *Mahāvākyas,* in brief, are the different paths for the realization of the Absolute. The statement '*Prajnanam Brahma'* directs the seeker to meditate on the *Chittsvarupa* (Pure Consciousness form) of *Brahman,* leading to the merger of the individual consciousness in the Universal and the attainment of *Mukt*i (liberation from worldly bondage) and the state of Supreme Bliss (*paramānanda*), '*Aham Brahmasmi'* is an endeavor to make the pupil engage in deep meditation to realize the Absolute, in the '*Tattvamasi*' the teacher is trying to make his pupil realize that his innate Being is part of the Absolute, '*Ayam Atma Brahman'* also accomplishes the same thing.

Dialectics: Dialectics and hermeneutics, etc. are theory loaded and elevated concepts. The pre-theoretical surrogate of these concepts can be found in the dialogues in the *Upanishad*s as well as of Socrates (c.470-399B.C.) as discussed above.

Dialectic has been used in almost all the dialogues available in the *Upanishads*. Dialectic has been operating at two levels:

It is a mode of argumentation to bring out a contradiction in the views of the other party. This process is generally known as the *Purva paksha*, the *khandan* and finally the *uttarpaksha.*

It resolves/ dissolves/ sublates the contradictions at higher levels.

[2] Paperzak, A. T., *System and History in Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, 1986, p.84.

In such dialogues as between Uddalaka and Nachiketa, we find that the dialogue begins with the empirical experiences, the *vyāvahārika sa*t. In order to resolve the contradictions at the *vyāvahārika* level, we go to the *pāramārthika* level. Like in a dialogue between Narad and Sanat Kumar, we find the examples of *parāvidyā* and *aparāvidyā*. There are certain occasions when dialectic fails to resolve the contradictions. The situation reminds us the dialogue between Socrates and Theaetitus. The dialogue occasionally takes the form of a severe disputation as at the symposium in King Janaka's court, which unfortunately became a tragedy on account of the implication uttered by Yājñavalkya on his last disputant, namely Salakya. In short there is always a need to overcome and sublate the contradiction either in terms of higher ideas or by recognizing the superiority of the leading philosopher.

Hermeneutics is a system of understanding, an interpretation, an attempt to find the hidden meaning of a text. In theology, hermeneutics means the interpretation of the spiritual truth of the Bible. It is said that Jesus interpreted himself to the Jews in terms of scriptural prophecy. Also, the Gospel writers interpreted Jesus to their audiences. However, during the period of modernization, secularization and humanization of Europe, i.e. during European modernity, hermeneutics came into prominence in the context European Protestant theology. In philosophy, the term hermeneutics was used first by Dilthey (1833-1911) to denote the discipline concerned with the investigation and interpretation of human behavior, speech, etc. as essentially intentional. In existentialism, hermeneutics has been used to enquire into the purpose of human existence.

If by hermeneutics we mean the interpretation of a text, this has been used by the *Mimāmsakas* and *Vedantins* probably from the 1st century B.C.[3] There are so many statements in the *Upanishads* which are so paradoxical, puzzling, symbolic, suggestive and aphoristic that we can not understand them without interpretation. Just to illustrate this point briefly here, let me take up the *Isavasya* text 5 which says, " That moves; That does not move; That is far off; That is very near; That is inside all this; and That is also outside all this." It is in this context that hermeneutics has been used to clarify the obvious paradoxes. Śankara comments on this text thus: "The meaning of text is that, though in itself the supreme Reality is motionless, it seems to move. Moreover, it is far off, because it is unattainable by the ignorant even in hundreds of millions of years. It is very near indeed to the men of knowledge. The reason for this is as follows. Being their very self …it is also very near. It is inside everything as stated in the Vedic text, "The Self that is within all."(*Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, 3.4.1.*), is inside this world consisting of name, form and activity. It is outside all this, because it is all-pervasive like ether; and it is inside, because it is extremely subtle." We have several paradoxical sentences occurring in the *Bhagavadagita, 13.13,* : "With hand and feet everywhere, with eyes, heads and mouths everywhere, with hearing everywhere, That (Brahman, which is to be known) exists enveloping all." One obviously knows that hands, feet, hearing, mouths etc. belong to the body. Here again we require the hermeneutics to explain the aphorisms and the paradoxes.

Smaller than the smallest, greater than the greatest, the soul is in the heart of every creature here. The one who is not impulsive sees it and is free of sorrow. Through the grace of the creator one sees the greatness of the soul. While sitting one may travel far; while lying down one may go everywhere. Who else but oneself can know the god of joy and sorrow, who is bodiless among bodies and stable among the unstable?

This soul is not obtained by instruction nor by intellect nor by much learning, but is obtained by the one chosen by this; to such the soul reveals itself. However, it is not revealed to those who have not ceased from bad conduct nor to those who are not peaceful. Those who drink of justice enter the secret place in the highest heaven. Thus correct ethics is a requirement, and one must also become peaceful.

These kinds of dialogues have been used to raise, discuss and to resolve/ dissolve not only the metaphysical and epistemological issues but also the ethical issues, the ethical dilemmas and the ethical preferences. Since the method of dialogue is at the centre of *Upanishadic* ethics, it will be quite fruitful to explain the operative terms of the dialogues in the *Upanishads*.

Plurality: In dialogue, there is an aspect of plurality. The Vedic exhortation is *Ekam sat viprāh bahudhā vadanti.* This has been the fundamental act of philosophizing in India. The Reality admits of alternative approaches in terms of thought constructions and linguistic expressions. It is pluralistic in its expression. Pluralism has been expressed in many ways in the later development of Indian philosophical systems; such as in the *Veda*nta philosophy, we go from one to many; in Vallabha *Veda*nta, we go from many to one; in Sankhya and Nyaya-Vaisesika systems, we go from many to many and in Buddhism, we go from nothing, i.e. *svabhāva shunya* to many. This has got its reflection in the initial characteristics of Indian society which is diverse, liberal, democratic and pluralistic in regulating and restructuring the morals, ethos and values. The pluralistic nature of Indian society is manifested in various ethnic identities, community structures, linguistic identities, different nationalities, languages and so on. In search of our local identities, we have to go into the details of our tradition. Indian tradition could be divided into two kinds; namely, the *Brāhminical* tradition and the *Shramana* tradition. The former is the textual, the written, the intellectual tradition or the *Shātriya paramparā* consisting of *the Dharma Sastras, Purusarthas, Asramas* etc. And the latter is the folk tradition, the tradition of the people or the *Lokaparamparā.* Fortunately we have had both the traditions as equally strong. However, it is the folk tradition, which has a stronger social basis. It consists of three pillars - family, community and the economy. Around these activities there developed idioms, symbols,

[3] Balasubramanian, R., "Hermeneutics of the Upanisads" in *The Voice of Śankara,* Vol.28, No.1, 2003, p.4.

proverbs, riddles and *sutras*. This was the corpus of knowledge.

Questioning as an Enquiring act: The *Kena Upanishad* consists of an older prose section and some more recent verse with which it begins. The word *Kena* means "by whom" and is the first word in a series of questions asking by whom is the mind projected, by whom does breathing go forth, by whom is speech impelled? What god is behind the eye and ear? The answer to these questions points to a mystical self that is beyond the mind and senses but is that God by which the mind and senses operate.

Deferring: Deferring is a method used by the sages to show the active and passive movement that consists in deferring by means of a delay, delegation, reprieve, referral, detour, postponement and reserving etc. Very often the seers are absolutely pertinent and do not illuminate anything except the one which is before them taking into account the capacity of the learner. We come across such an instance in the celebrated dialogue between Prajapati, Indra and Virochana in *Chāndogya Upanishad*. The preceptor does not disclose the wisdom at once but defers it and reserves it for some other occasions. It thus happens that Virochana is completely satisfied with the first answer of Prajapati but Indra is not. Indra proposes the preceptor again and again for the solution of his difficulties. Deferring helps Prajapati to understand and appreciate the capacity of the learner. At the end Prajapati discloses the secret of his philosophy and supplies us with an excellent example of the method of deferring employed in the *Upanishads.*

Analogical Approach: It is an inference making it possible to draw conclusions about the similarity of objects in certain of their properties on the basis of the similarity of other properties. It has been used at many places in the *Upanishads.* When, for example, the sage Yājñavalkya introduces the analogy of the drum, the conch or the lute in order to explain the process of the apprehension of the self, or when again Aruni introduces the analogy of the juices, which in constituting honey ceases to be different from it, or again of the rivers that flow into the ocean and become merged in it, or of salt which becomes one with water when it is poured into it, and so on. All these analogies are used to show the identity and difference between the individual soul and the universal soul by means of analogies alone. Psychology is explained in the *Katha Upanishad* by using the analogy of a chariot. The soul is the lord of the chariot, which is the body. The intuition *(buddhi)* is the chariot-driver, the mind the reins, the senses the horses, and the objects of the senses the paths. Those who do not understand and whose minds are undisciplined with senses out of control are like the wild horses of a chariot that never reaches its goals; these go on to reincarnate. The wise reach their goal with Vishnu and are not born again. The hierarchy, starting from the bottom, consists of the objects of sense, the senses, the mind, the intuition, the soul, the unmanifest, and the person *(Purusha).*

Synthesis: It has a reference to what is immediately given to us by means of the senses and within the spatio-temporal frame in terms of the *vyāvahārika sat.* There is a synthesis of thought affected by Asvapati Kaikeya out of the doctrines of the six cosmological philosophers in the *Chāndogya* or by Prajapati out of the six psycho-metaphysical questions propounded to him by the six seers in the *Prasnopanishad.*

Aphorisms: Aphorisms are used for the benefit of compressing all the material of thought in short pregnant sentences. It leaves enough conceptual space for the commentators to provide as the best and the varied interpretation of them. The best example of the aphoristic method we find in the *Māndūkya Upanishad* . It is perhaps because of this method that the name*Vedānta Sutras* have been interpreted in so many ways that 8 to 10 schools of *Veda*nta philosophy have come up. To translate from *Māndūkya Upanishad* we are told how "the syllable ***Om*** is verily all that exists. Under it is included all the past, the present and the future, as well as that which transcends them. Verily all this is *Brahman*. The *Ātman* is *Brahman*. This *Ātman*is four footed. The first foot is *Vaisvanara* who enjoys the gross things... in the waking stage. The second foot is *Taijasa* who enjoys exquisite things… in the state of dream. The third is *Prajnā* who enjoys bliss… in the state of deep sleep… The fourth is the *Ātman*… who is alone, without the second, calm, holy and tranquil." Consciousness is uniformly present in all the three stages of experience. The body and the senses are present at the waking level, but these are absent at the dream level, even the mind is absent at the deep sleep level, but consciousness is present at all the three levels of experience. Consciousness is the witness of all the three episodes. But consciousness as such cannot be known under the knowledge-situation just as tongue cannot taste itself. This is the fourth state, the nameless, i.e., *turiya*. It is the state where consciousness is left to itself, trans-empirical, trans-rational, trans-linguistic. At the most we can describe it negatively. There is no other than anything outside, no other than anything inside, is the way that *turiya* state is described in the VII *Mantra* of the *Māndūkya Upanishad*. Then question arises how does *turiya* state differ from the *susupti* state? *Turiya* state could be a mystical state, through meditation, etc., which if one has it, one has it, one does not have it, one does not have it. It is *adristam, avyavahāryam, agrāhyam, alaksanam, achintam, santam, sivam, advaitam*, etc. It is at this stage that *ātman* is to be entirely identified with the *Brahman*. In other words, if I am the *ātman* and *ātman* is Absolute; then, it follows syllogistically, that I am the Absolute. I am *Brahman. Aham Brahmāsmi.* This is also the highest metaphysical teaching of all the *Vedas.*

To bring this paper to a close, we can say that dialogue along with other perspectives will incorporate, absorb all contradictions, oppositions and differences between one culture and another, and will try to transcend and sublate them, so that it becomes all-inclusive and can evolve a global culture. *One's* identity (linguistic, ethnic, cultural, etc.) could

be identified and shaped only by means of a dialogue through its exposure to and experience of the *other's* identity of the same or the neighbouring culture. An identity is therefore identical within differences. This is the principle of the unity and the struggle of opposites. The being of an identity is being-with and being-in-contrast-with-other identities. Dialogue will address the problems not in abstraction, but in terms of the social nexus, spatio-temporal frame, earthly existence, historical and actual life of human culture and civilization. Dialogue is hermeneutic in its comprehension, dialectical in its presentation and pluralistic in its manifestation so that one's views can participate with those of the other, of East and West, Indian and Ionian, Oriental and Occidental. The method of dialogue is not merely instrumental but also emancipatory at the same time.