

The Concept of Self in Wittgenstein and Advaita Vedānta : A Comparison

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In the twentieth century philosophical world, L. Wittgenstein's contribution to the contemporary Western Philosophy is remarkable. He is famous for his two epoch-making books **Tractatus Logico Philosophicus** (1921) and **Philosophical Investigations** (1953). These two books, respectively mark the early period and the later period of his philosophical career.

It is interesting to note that if we go deep into Early Wittgenstein's account of self and its relation with the world, we may find out some striking similarities between the Wittgensteinian account and *Ātman* of Advaita Vedānta. Though these two philosophical traditions are far apart in time and culture and Wittgenstein was not at all directly influenced by Advaita Vedānta, yet, researches have been made in recent past to bring out their illuminating parallels in spite of some obvious differences between them. Wittgenstein owed much to Schopenhauer and Schopenhauer was a great admirer of Vedāntic philosophy. So, it is not unlikely that some reflections of Vedāntic philosophy are there on Wittgenstein. The person who deserves special mention to focus light on such comparative studies between Wittgenstein's Philosophy and Advaita Vedānta is Ravindra K. S. Choudhary in his book Wittgenstein's **Philosophy and Advaita Vedānta**.

The notion of self occupies a very important position in the transcendental framework of Wittgenstein's **Tractatus Logico Philosophicus**. There he made a distinction between 'philosophical self' and 'psychological self'.

Wittgenstein was not interested in the psychological self which is actually the thinking subject. Wittgenstein thought that neither the psychological states nor their subjects (human beings, souls) are good enough to attract philosophers. He writes in the **Tractatus** : There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas¹.

On the contrary, he allows the philosophical self or the metaphysical subject to play a very vital role in his early philosophy. It lies beyond the realm of psychology and physical reality. This metaphysical subject is the limit of the world, not a part of it. The relation between the self and the world is not causal, rather, the relation is transcendental. Because of this non-causal relation between the two, the question of freedom of will is easily solved by early Wittgenstein.²

Just like the difference between the psychological self and the metaphysical subject in Wittgenstein, we find in Advaita Vedānta a distinction between *jīva* and *ātman*. The *Mundaka Upanisad* tells us about two birds which are inseparable companions and cling to the same tree. One of them eats the sweet fruit while the other merely looks on without eating, (III, I, i).

Dr. Radhakrishnan says that the former is the empirical self and the latter—the transcendental self.³ The empirical self or the *jīva* is limited by the impure adjuncts of nescience, the mind-body aggregate. *Ātman* is the self which is Pure Consciousness. It is self luminous and transcends the subject-object duality and the trinity of knower-known and knowledge and all the categories of intellect.⁴

According to Wittgenstein, no special importance is given to my body or the human body over the bodies such as stones and plants. In his **Notebooks**, Wittgenstein writes : "The human body however, my body in particular, is a part of the world among others, among beasts, plants, stones etc."⁵

Similarly, Schopenhauer maintained that all individuals are one. The Universe is a unity. This parallels the Indian philosophical *Sūtra* such as *Ekam Eba Advitiam* — It is no other. It is the ultimate unique one. In the *Gīta* (B. G 6,30), it is written : "One who sees Me in the everything, and sees all things in Me — I do not go out of his vision, and he also is not lost to My Vision."

In the **Notebooks**, Wittgenstein remarks : "The I, the I is what is deeply mysterious" (NB, p. 80e). Further, in the spirit of *Advaita*, Wittgenstein speaks of here being in reality "Only one world soul." (NB 49C).

These lines show the deep influence of Schopenhauer on Wittgenstein because Schopenhauer emphasized the incomparable identity of the Individual will with the sovereign universal will. This reminds us of the celebrated

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Vedāntic Verse : অয়ম্ আত্মা ব্রহ্মা সর্ব হি এতদ্ ব্রহ্ম। অহম্ ব্রহ্ম অস্মি। তত্ ত্বম্ অসি। – It means : I am the all. This soul is everything, My soul is one with the Absolute. Everything ultimately is the Absolute Divinity. You too are the supreme principle. Thou art that. Wittgenstein says something similar in a different language :

“Only remember that the spirit of the snake, of the lion is your spirit. For it is only from yourself that you are acquainted with spirit at all. The same with the elephant, with the fly, with the Wasp. (Notebooks, p. 85e).

Like the Advaita Vedānta, he too maintains the essential unity of all beings, animate and inanimate alike. The principle of unity at a higher level is a great contribution of Advaitic teaching to mankind.

Ravindra K. S. Choudhary points out that the closest parallel of Wittgenstein’s metaphysical self that one can draw is with the Advaitic conception of *Sāksin*. Like the *Sāksin* or “the pure witness” of Advaita Vedānta, the “metaphysical self” of Wittgenstein is the ultimate witness. It can never be an object of experience.

Wittgenstein has made use of the analogy of the eye and the visual field to emphasize that the metaphysical self is not a part of the world but it is a limit of the world. (TLP S.632). The existence of the eye cannot be known from the visual field — even it cannot be inferred from any of the items of the visual field. It is, therefore unknown and unknowable.

Following Kant, Schopenhauer maintained that the things-in-themselves are unknowable, consequently, the self which is the thing-in-itself within me, is un-intelligible. This reminds us of the Vedāntic Verse : নেতি নেতি। যতো বাচো নিবর্তন্তে অপ্রাপ্য মনসা সহ। Its English translation may be something like this : It is not like this ; nor is it like that. It is quite different from all that we know in this phenomenal world. Neither speech nor mind can approach it.

In Advaita Vedānta, *Sāksin* is regarded as the ultimate witness that plays an intermediary role between *Brahman* and *Jiva*. Though *Sāksin* is pure consciousness, it maintains a unity in manifold experience of the subject.

Similarly, Wittgenstein says that whatever object we can experience is a part of the world. Since the subject does not belong to the world, it cannot be an object of our knowledge. Wittgenstein identifies consciousness with life.

As to Wittgenstein’s analogy of the eye and the visual field, we find something very much similar in the Vedānta. Every knowledge situation presupposes the self but this self itself is not given in experience. It is beyond phenomenality or what Advaitins call *Māyā*.

Let us now look into the comparative studies made by different Indian Philosophers. For example, G. N. Mathrani’s book **Studies in Wittgensteinian Philosophy** or **Studies in the New Cambridge Philosophy** have been recognized as very important document to present a bridge between Wittgenstein’s philosophy and Advaita Vedānta.⁷ He was the first among the Indian Philosophers to study Wittgenstein’s philosophy directly from Wittgenstein’s own class lectures. He established a connection between analytic philosophy and Vedāntic Philosophy.

K. Satchidananda Murty made constructive use of certain Wittgensteinian ideas in explicating issues of Advaita Vedānta. In his book **Revelation and Reason on Advaita Vedānta** he compared the distinction made by Wittgenstein between ‘saying’ and ‘showing’ with the relationship between language and *Brahman*.⁸ In Vedānta, *Brahman* is called indescribable or অনির্বাচ্য — *Brahman* can never be grasped by language but can only be shown.

R. Balasubramaniam in his **Primal Spirituality of the Vedās : Its Renewal and Renaissance**, makes a comparative discussion between Advaita Vedānta and Wittgenstein in several respects. One such point of similarity he found between Wittgenstein’s philosophical or metaphysical I and Advaitic view of the self. According to him, the soul cannot be talked about unless there is ‘a false identification’ of the self with the non-self both in Advaita and in Wittgenstein.⁹ In his another book **The tradition of Vedānta**, Balasubramaniam writes that the Real which is expressible shows itself.¹⁰ In the same tone Wittgenstein also speaks of when he is concerned about the limits of language. According to Wittgenstein, language is limited by its nature and by its extent, its limits are given by logical form, and in the sum of all propositions, which corresponds to the totality of the world. But neither logical form, nor the totality of the world can be represented by language.

So, those limits are transgressed while setting the limits. In the limitation of language, we grasp what lies beyond the limits, the inexpressible. But how should we grasp what is inexpressible ?

To answer this question, Wittgenstein introduced the difference between what can be said and what can only be shown. He claims that the inexpressible is shown or shows itself — it cannot be said. It should be put to silence.

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Like Wittgenstein, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan too brings out the significance of silence with regard to divine reality. Radhakrishnan in his ‘‘The Hindu view of Life’’ writes that Silence is more significant than speech regarding the depth of the divine....the mystery of the divine reality eludes the machinery of speech and symbol.....’’That of which nothing can be said,’’ and such other expressions are used by the devout when they attempt to describe their consciousness of direct communion with God.¹¹

Thus Radhakrishnan’s view also coheres with the famous Wittgensteinian distinction between ‘‘what can be said’’, and ‘‘What can be shown’’. Besides this point of similarity, there is another aspect, which concerns the matters of value and have broad similarity between Wittgenstein and Radhakrishnan who is known as a neo-Vedāntin. Another Indian thinker S. Panneerselvam has tried to show some parallels between Wittgenstein and Śankara, in the background of the philosophy of language based on the problem of meaning in his book **The Problem of Meaning with Reference to Wittgenstein and Sankara : A Study in the Philosophy of Language (1993)**.¹² T.M.P Mahadeva is another thinker who made use of Wittgensteinian philosophy on different occasions. Like Wittgenstein, he has attempted to show the limits of language and the significance of silence on ultimate questions. His paper ‘Contemporary Relevance of the Insights of Advaita’ in the book **Contemporary Indian Philosophy** bear discussions following line of thought which are similar to those of early Wittgenstein.¹³

Another pioneer thinker in this field is R. C. Pradhan who has written many a book to bring out affinity between Wittgenstein and Vedānta. Some remarkable books of Mr. Pradhan are (a) **The Great Mirror : An Eassay on Wittgenstein’s Tractatus**, Kalki Publication, 2002, (b) **Language and Experience : An Introduction of the Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein**, Meerut : Anu Prakashan, 1981 or (c) R. C. Pradhan (ed.), **The Philosophy of Wittgenstein : Indian Responses**, New Delhi, Decent Books, 2001.

According to him, the Vedāntic concept of World is closer to Wittgensteinian conception of the world. For Wittgenstein, the world is contingent and is in time. It itself does not carry any value or any metaphysical necessity about it. This is because the world itself is accidental and has no causal explanation. Both Wittgenstein and Śankara viewed the world as a mystery because both of them think that there is no reason why there should exist a world at all. The world is one among the possibilities which have no limits. Wittgenstein is sure that the actual world is insignificant in comparison with the infinite possibilities which constitute the reality. This total reality is the Advaitic *Brahman*. It is the whole reality that cannot be expressed in language অনিৰ্বাচ্য but can only be conceived or thought. In this way R. C. Pradhan describes the crux of the Vedantic way of thinking which Wittgenstein shares.¹⁴

Not only Indian Philosophers have tried to find out similarities between Wittgenstein’s philosophy and Advaita Vedānta and *Upanisads*, but many Western thinkers too have discovered such points of similarity between the philosophical endeavours of the two. The list of Indian Philosophers is increasing in this field and in addition to that we may also mention names of Western thinkers like Copleston, Brian R. Clack, W. H. Brenner, Ben-Ami-Scharfstein, Tomlin, Ray Monk and many others who have brought out closeness between Wittgenstein’s Philosophy and Vedānta.

J. N. Findlay has discovered considerable affinity between Wittgenstein’s Philosophy and Buddhism. According to him, the final illuminations of the *Tractatus* have considerable affinity with certain Buddhist utterances — the elimination of the ladder parallels the abandonments of the boat which has conveyed the pilgrim to the further shore. But Findlay also admits that Wittgenstein’s views have more affinity with the view of the *Upanisad* about the Absolute Self or *Ātman*.¹⁵

So, different philosophers, both Indian and Western, agree that it is possible to find out a good deal of similarities between Wittgensteinian philosophy and Advaita Vedānta that can shed light on both of these two philosophical systems.

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