

On Understanding the *Maitreyi* Section of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*

Dr. K.S. Sivakumar

*Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit and Indian Culture
Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Viswa Mahavidyalaya (SCSVMV)
Enathur, Kanchipuram*

Abstract

An attempt is made in the paper to understand the Maitreyi section of the Brihadaranyaka Upanisad. The need arises due to the fact that, at the outset, the terminology used by Adam Smith, the father of economics, and Sage Yajnavalkya, have similar meaning. On expounding, we find that the term 'own interest' used by Adam Smith and the term 'own's own sake' used by Sage Yajnavalkya, have similar denotative meaning. But the connotative meaning of the terms are entirely in opposition to one another. While 'own interest', as mentioned by Adam Smith, connotes to selfishness/narrow self-interest, 'one's own sake', as mentioned by Sage Yajnavalkya, connotes to Universal Self (Atman)/Brahman. In conclusion, it may be stated that any textual and conceptual study must necessarily be cautious in accurate understanding of the denotative and connotative meaning of the terminologies under study. Studies involving inter-disciplinary/multi-disciplinary domains must be more cautious in this regard.

Keywords: Economics, Own interest, Advaita Vedanta, *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*, *Maitreyi Brahmana*, Sage Yajnavalkya, One's own sake.

Introduction

"It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest."

-Adam Smith, the Father of Economics, in *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the Wealth of Nations*.

“It is not for the sake of all, my dear, that all is loved, but for one’s own sake that all is loved.”

- Sage Yajnavalkya to his wife Maitreyi in the *Maitreyi Brahmana*/section of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad* (II.iv.5)

At the outset, it looks as though the above two famous proclamations are identical in championing the cause for selfish behavior of individuals. This observation may be true as far as Adam Smith and economics is concerned. Is this observation true in case of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad* and the Philosophy of Advaita Vedanta? Hence, there is a need for a proper understanding on the *Maitreyi Brahmana*/section of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*. The paper is an attempt in this direction.

Before discussing the perspectives of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*, let us briefly state the position of economics with reference to self-interested behaviour.

The position of Economics

Economics consider man as a rational being. By faithfully imbibing the Utilitarian approach to ethics, economics state that ‘rationality’ refers to the maximization of utility/satisfaction/pleasure. Therefore, the ethical standard/ideal of economics is given by the principle of maximization of satisfaction. This standard is sought to be realized in all actions of individuals and such actions are only considered as rational actions in economics. Moreover, moral judgement (right action and wrong action) are effected only with reference to the standard of maximization of utility/satisfaction/pleasure.

Thus, the ethical structure of economics itself foster selfishness. Therefore, it is only logical for economics to cherish selfishness/self-interested behaviour of individuals.

Let now attempt to understand the perspectives of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*.

The *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*

The *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad* is one of the most important *Upanisad* in the Advaita Vedantic tradition. Since this *Upanisad* is large, it is termed as *Brihadaranyaka*. Brahman - *Atman* identity constitute the theme of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*. The famous *Mahavakya* ‘*Aham Brahma Asmi*’ (I am Brahman) occurs in the *Upanisad* (I.iv.10).

The *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad* consists of three *Kandas*, namely, the *Madhu-kanda*, the *Yajnavalkya-kanda/muni-kanda*, and the *Khila-kanda*. The *Madhu-kanda* conveys the main teaching of the *Advaita* doctrine and is of the nature of *Upadesa*. The *Yajnavalkya-kanda/muni-kanda* embodies the logical argument and explanation, establishing the soundness of the *Upadesa*. The *Khila-kanda* deals with certain *Upasanas* or modes of meditation.

The *Maitreyi Brahmana*/Section of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*

The Fourth *Brahmana* of the fourth chapter in *Madhu-kanda* is known as the *Maitreyi Brahmana*/section of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*. In this section, the great sage Yajnavalkya commends the spiritual fitness of his wife Maitreyi and proceeds to teach her the great truth of the Advaita Vedanta.

To a question posed by Maitreyi, on the topic of immortality, sage Yajnavalkya declares that there is no hope, even in thought, of immortality through wealth (*Amrtatvasya tu nasosti vittena - II.iv.2*). Sage Yajnavalkya conveys to Maitreyi the great truth that the pure Spirit/Self (*Atman*) is the ultimate object of all forms of love and is to be realized as eternal Bliss and Immortal. The Sage elaborates that it is not for the sake of the husband, the wife, the sons, wealth, the *Brahmana*, *Ksatriya*, worlds, the Gods, beings and all (including everything that has and has not been mentioned) that they are loved, but for one's own sake that they are loved.

Sage Yajnavalkya uses the term "one's own sake" to mean the "Universal Self/Brahman" which is worthy of realization and should be the ideal of realization. Self-realization refers to the inner intuitive experience of Self/*Atman*-Brahman identity. In fact, Self-Brahman identity forms the main purport of all the Vedantic texts, in general, and this great *Upanisad*, in particular.

Further, Sage Yajnavalkya elucidates the path/way to realize the Self, leading to immortality. He proclaims that the *Atman* is realized through the scheme of knowing the truth from the *Upanisads* (*sravana*), investigating and discussing it (*manana*) and constant contemplation upon it (*nididhyasana*) (*Atma va are drastavyah srotavyo mantavyo nididhyasitavyah - II.iv.5*). Other important techniques mentioned in the *Upanisad* includes *Adhyaropa* (Superimposition) and *Apavada* (subsequent sublation/withdrawal) as well as *neti-neti* (not this-not this) (*III.ix.26*).

Conclusion

From the above discussion, we are able to deduce an important understanding that the term 'own interest' (as used by Adam Smith) and the term 'one's own sake' (as used by Sage Yajnavalkya) might seem to have similar denotative meaning. But the connotative meaning of the terms are entirely in opposition to one another. While 'own interest', as mentioned by Adam Smith, connotes to selfishness/narrow self-interest, 'one's own sake', as mentioned by Sage Yajnavalkya, connotes to Universal Self (*Atman*)/Brahman. While the former excludes everyone other than one self, the latter includes everyone.

It must be pointed out here that any textual and conceptual study must necessarily be cautious in accurate understanding of the denotative and connotative meaning of the terminologies under study. Studies involving inter-disciplinary/multi-disciplinary domains must be more cautious in this regard.

Let us conclude by reminding ourselves that the *Upanisads* are our greatest treasure and earnest effort must be made to preserve them, not merely in digital form, but most importantly, through proper study under the grace and guidance of a competent and benevolent teacher.

References:

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