

The Homeric and Vedic Convergence

Ralph H. Abraham*

29 may 2016

Dedicated to William Irwin Thompson, cultural historian and futurist.

Abstract

Two roots of the Platonic cosmology join in a subtle bifurcation, or convergence, in Ancient Greece. The Yogic tradition of Vedic Sanskrit, perhaps transmitted by Pythagoras, and the Homeric of Archaic Greek, are yoked by Plato.

*Mathematics Department, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA USA-95064, *rha@ucsc.edu*.

1. Introduction

On my schedule for winter 2015/2016, two major events were scheduled back to back: A conference in India on consciousness, cognition, and culture, and a ten week course at my university, the University of California at Santa Cruz, on chaos, fractals, and the arts. On return from India in mid December, there were only a few days to prepare for the course, and my mind was full of ideas from the conference, so I decided to devote the course to these thoughts on chaos, fractals, and consciousness. The course unrolled in unexpected directions, including contributions from three guest lecturers, one of whom was philosophy professor Dr. Paul A. Lee. The present essay, especially the first section, owes much to Dr. Lee.

In the final lecture, on March 8, 2016, I attempted to synthesize all that had transpired. In this essay, based on that final lecture, I seek to bring together Lee's ideas on the birth of rational self-consciousness in the thinking of Socrates in Ancient Greece with the genesis of mathematical models of consciousness in Vedic India. It is this conjunction, manifest in the cosmology of Plato and exemplary of the cultural bifurcation idea championed by cultural historian William Irwin Thompson, that I am calling the Platonic bifurcation.

I will describe the two roots individually at first, and then bring them together.

To appreciate just what a transformation of world view it is to move from enumeration to geometrizing, we have only to compare the mentality of Hesiod with that of Pythagoras or Plato. Enumeration is a fairly straightforward way of relating humanity to divinity, but when the line folds into triangles and squares, the pattern becomes more complex. One can begin to see the unconscious emergence of the geometrizing mentality in the *Iliad*, for there the lines of descent are beginning to cross over to create patterns.¹

Greek

The Archaic Greek roots of the Western philosophy of mind may be found in the earliest Greek literature.²

First of all, the epic poets, beginning with Homer. Whether or not Homer existed as a person and wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, they were created and written in Homeric Greek in the 9th or 8th century BCE. And here are found the first fundamentals of Greek theory of mind, the nous (the cause of ideas and images), the psyche (the life force), and the thymus (the mental organ responsible motion, emotion, and agitation).³

Following the Homeric corpus are the Seven Wise Men, then the Presocratics (especially Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, and Pythagoras). Both Thales (624-546) and

¹(Thompson, 1985; pp. 95-96)

²A comprehensive account may be found in (Snell, 1982; ch. 1). See also (Onions, 1988; Parts I and II).

³See (Snell, 1982; pp. 8-12) and (Onions, 1988; ch. II).

Pythagoras (570-495) were mathematicians who trained In Egypt. Then came Socrates (470-399 BCE), and Plato (428-349 BCE).

It is generally believed that Socrates triggered the major bifurcation from the poetic or mythic style of consciousness of Homer to the rational self-consciousness or philosophical style characteristic of Western thinking ever since.

This moment is ascribed by Dr. Lee to the parable of the cave in the *Republic*.⁴

Then you get the parable of the cave. And you can take that as Plato's reading of the transition from Homeric consciousness to Socratic consciousness. You know, in the Homeric state of mind you're chained in the cave and you're looking at these shadows of images of reality. There's a walkway up above—behind you—and in front of some lights like fires there are parading images of reality to cast their shadows on the wall of the cave—sounds like television. And everybody sits there thinking that that's it. And then one of them breaks free of his chains and he goes up and he sees the light of day and he's so amazed that he comes back down to tell everybody and they kill him. So it's obviously a parable of the fate of Socrates, but it's also a parable about the overcoming of Homeric consciousness, or the Homeric state of mind and coming into the light of day through rational self-consciousness and one's own autonomy.

Plato organized the Homeric aspects of consciousness and the rationality of Socrates into an hierarchical scheme of three layers: the Good, the Soul, and the Body. In this model, the Soul (psyche) comprised three parts: the Logical (logistikon, from logos), the Spirited (thymoiedes, from thymos), and the Appetitive (epithymia). This is found in the *Republic* (especially in the parable of the cave and the myth of Er), written around 380 BCE.⁵ See Figure 1.

Plato's conception of the world soul is found in the *Timaeus* (28-40), written around 360 BCE. The creation the world from the four regular solids is also found there.

Following Plato, further evolution of the model of the cosmos arrived at the four-level hierarchy of the Neoplatonists. According to Plotinus (204-270 CE), the first Neoplatonic writer, the four levels were: the One, the Intellect, the Soul, and the Body. By the Renaissance, a fifth level, Spirit, was interpolated between the Soul and the Body. Thus we find in Ficino (1433-1499 CE) this tableau:

1. The One, het
2. The Intellect, nous
3. The Soul, psyche
4. The Spirit, pneuma

⁴(Lee, 2014).

⁵(*Republic*, Book 4 (436ff)).

5. The Body, soma

We may regard this as the epitome of the Cosmology of Plato.

Sanskrit

Our most ancient literature comprises the four Vedas of India, Rig Veda, Yajur Veda (in two parts, Krishna and Shukla), Sama Veda, and Atharva Veda, along with their associated Brahmana, Aranyaka, and Upanishad books. The time frame of the writing of the four Vedas spans the second millennium BCE, or three to four thousand years ago. Undoubtedly they existed as oral traditions for some millennia before their written forms.

In the Taittiriya Aranyaka associated to the Krishna Yajur Veda, from 6th century BCE, We find a cosmology of seven upper worlds, or Sapta Urdhvaloka. These, all prefigured in the older Veda, are, from the top:

1. Existence, sat
2. Consciousness, chit
3. Bliss, ananda
4. Knowledge, vijnana
5. Mind, dyu
6. Life, prana
7. Matter, bhumi

Of these, the top two are universal, while the others belong to individual consciousness.

Soon, the top three collapsed into one, forming the five sheaths model, or Pancha Kosa, also from the Taittiriya Aranyaka, 6th century:⁶

1. Bliss, ananda
2. Knowledge, vijnana
3. Mind, dyu
4. Life, prana
5. Matter, bhumi

⁶Jamadagni, 2014; pp. 315-318.

Again, the top level is universal, the others individual. This Sanskrit scheme is shown in Figure 2, along with the corresponding Greek scheme of Plato. The One and the World Soul of Plato correspond to the universal levels of the Sanskrit scheme.⁷

The Mandukya Upanishad, from the Atharva Veda, is another late text of the principle Upanishads. It is a short prose work of great importance in the Hindu tradition. Its date is contested, given as early as 5th century BCE by some authorities, and as late as 2nd century CE by others, although it certainly has more ancient roots.

It is of importance to our inquiry into the evolution of consciousness for its clear presentation of the four states of consciousness: waking mind, dreaming mind, deep sleep, and pure consciousness. These are associated with the three syllabus of AUM, plus silence. William Irwin Thompson makes a strong case for this text as a watershed in the evolution of consciousness.⁸ If we take the early date for this text, it follows soon after the Pancha Kosa of the Taittiriya Aranyaka, and is contemporary with Pythagoras, the transmission of Ancient Egyptian geometry to Greece, and the roots of Plato's cosmology.

The Platonic bifurcation

It is a traditional "platotude" that Plato synthesized the philosophies of Socrates and Pythagoras. But now we are proposing more. That is, Plato combined the tripartite theory of the soul from Homer with the five levels of consciousness (Pancha Kosa) of Vedic Sanskrit and presented the result in the Republic.

Further, he combined the four element theory synthesized from the Presocratics with the four regular solids known to The Pythagoreans (the pyramid, tetrahedron, cube, and icosahedron) in the Timeus. The fifth regular solid (the dodecahedron) was added as the basic unit of the universe.

The priority of four (from the elements) reflected in the cosmography of the Timaeus was preserved by Plotinus and the Neoplatonists in the four level cosmology,⁹ In the Renaissance, the five levels of the Vedas were restored by Ficino.

The influence of the earlier Sanskrit literature on the Greek synthesis might be understood by cultural diffusion during the empire of Cyrus the Great (558-380 BCE). The explosion of Alexander the Great from Greece to India after 327 BCE followed after the time of Plato, but might have carried the ideas of Plato and Arisototle from Greece back to India.

Further, ancient trade between India, Egypt, and Mesopotamia is well attested in the archeological record, so Thales and Pythagoras may have learned of the Sanskrit models of consciousness. A histomap of this bifurcation event is shown in Figure 3. Note that the Homeric and Vedic traditions are roughly contemporary.¹⁰ The similarity of the concepts

⁷See (McEvelly, 2002; pp. 164–165 and 208) for details.

⁸(Thompson, 1996; ch. 11)

⁹For Indian influences on Plotinus, see (McEvelly, 2002; p. 550).

¹⁰See (McEvelly, 2002; pp. 60–61) for details.

of mind and soul in the two traditions are treated at length by Onians.¹¹

Orientalism

The imperial conceit of the Europeans in supposing their culture superior to that of the middle and far eastern nations has been called Orientalism. A definitive history of it was published in 1944 by the Palestinian cultural historian and critic Edward Said (1935-2003), Professor of Literature at Columbia University. I build on Said in the following.¹²

Sanskrit studies in Europe began in the 1600s. The first of the French Sanskritists was the amateur, Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731-1805), who travelled to India to study the Zend-Avesta, which he translated In 1759. He went on to translate the Upanishads, in Paris, in 1786.

Anquetil-Duperron was followed by the Welsh philologist William Jones (1746-1784), a founder of the Asiatic Society, who discovered the Indo-European language family. After him, Sanskrit studies achieved the status of scientific knowledge.

In 1798 Napoleon invaded Egypt, accompanied by an army of scholars. Despite the failure of this military campaign in 1801, a treasure trove of Egyptian materials were carried to Paris, where the field of Oriental Studies began. Sanskrit studies were soon included.¹³

Indology was born as an academic discipline in this century, and Max Muller's edition of the Rigveda appeared in 1849-1875.

Imperial orientalist and Indophobia began soon after. This retrogression of orientalism is mysterious, as the early pioneers were highly appreciative of Sanskrit literature. For example, Sir William Jones wrote:

The *Sanscrit* language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure, more perfect than the *Greek*, more copious than the *Latin*, and more exquisitely refined than either,¹⁴

Conclusion

The lecture of Dr. Lee in my class was devoted to the idea that rational self-consciousness emerged with Socrates, representing a turning point between Homer and Plato in the History of Western philosophy. This gave me the idea for this essay on the Platonic bifurcation.

¹¹(Onians, 1988; pp. 75, 512)

¹²(Said, 1979)

¹³(Said, 1979; pp. 75-77)

¹⁴(Said, 1979; p. 79)

But what is rational self-consciousness? Fortunately we have Dr. Lee's essay on this subject online.¹⁵ It appears to be a persistent thread in the history of Western philosophy, appearing for example in Hegel (1770-1831).

But Dr. Lee's lecture in my class (February 2, 2016) was the ninth in a series of ten. In the first six lectures I had described the development of models of consciousness in the Sanskrit tradition beginning in the Vedas, an oral corpus dating from 1500 BCE or so, some centuries before Homer, although perhaps not written until the time of Plato or later.

In this Sanskrit tradition we find the notion of cosmic consciousness as early as the Taittiriya Aranyaka, a century or so before the World Soul appears in the Greek line, in the Timaeus of Plato. The idea of the self, as the observer of one's own mental activity, is also clear in the yogic literature.

Following the bifurcation event, the convergence of the Homeric and the Vedic traditions, the two philosophical traditions each continued in apparently independent developmental pathways, ignorant of one another. The Platonic path evolved in Neoplatonism to the five levels of Ficino by 1450, while the Sanskrit line grew into the thirty-six tattvas of Kashmiri Shaivism by the year 1000. The evolution of Orientalism in the West provides a partial rationale for the decline of interaction between the two evolutionary pathways.

¹⁵(Lee, 2014)

References

Articles

- Abraham, Ralph Herman (2015). Mathematics and mysticism. *Progress in Biophysics & Molecular Biology*, v. 119, pp. 442-452.

Books

- Abraham, Ralph Herman, and Sisir Roy (2010). *Demystifying the Akasha: Consciousness and the Quantum Vacuum*. Rhinebeck, NY: Epigraph.
- Jamadagni, Shrikant, transl., R. L. Kashyap, ed. (2014). *Krishna Yajur Veda, Taittiriya Aranyaka, Part I*. Sri Aurobindo Kapali Sastry Institute of Culture. Bangalore, India.
- McEvelly, Thomas (2002). *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Thought*. New York, NY: Allworth Press.
- Onians, Ricard Broxton (1951/1988). *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate: New Interpretations of Greek, Roman and kindred evidence also of some basic Jewish and Christian beliefs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Said, Edward W. (1944/1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Random House.
- Snell, Bruno (1953/1982). *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Dover.
- Thompson, William Irwin (1985) *Pacific Shift*. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books.
- Thompson, William Irwin (1996/1998) *Coming into Being: Artifacts and Texts in the Evolution of Consciousness*. New York, NY: St. Martin Griffin.

Websites

- Lee, Paul A. *Socrates and the Rise of Rational Self-consciousness in Ancient Greece* (2014). <http://ecotopia.org/socrates-rise-rational-self-consciousness/>

Figures

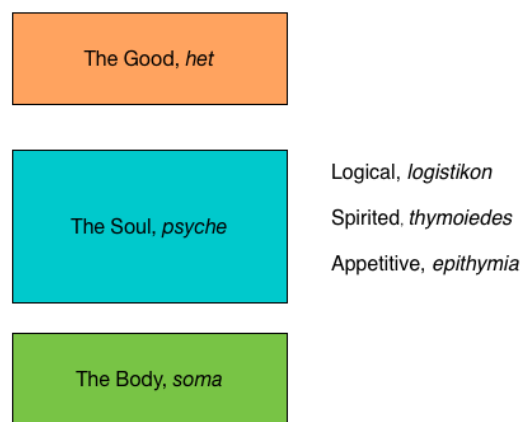


Figure 1: The cosmos according to Plato.

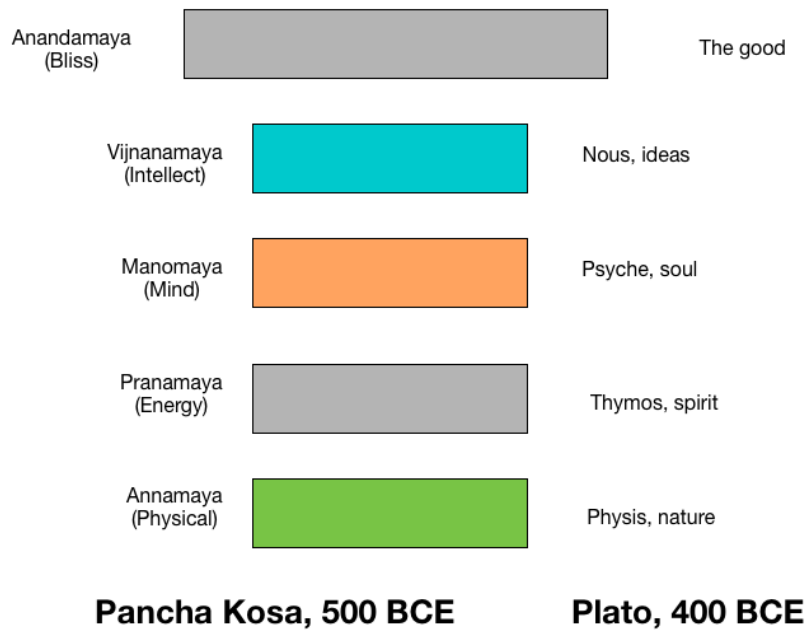


Figure 2: Upanishad system, left, compared with the Neoplatonic system, right.

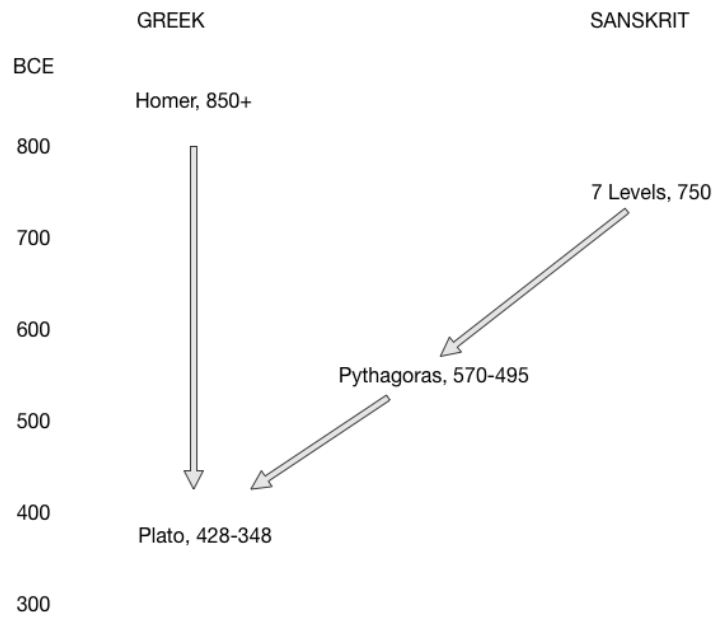


Figure 3: Histomap of the Platonic bifurcation.