



**Man- a 'Sophisticated Ape'?**  
**Man, Nature, Evolution, and the Problem of Alienation- An**  
**Upanisadic Resolution.**

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The cliché claim that man is a rational animal is the basis of endowing upon him all responsibilities of social or cultural in nature. But this attribution has in it hidden another implication that man is basically an animal. And any philosophy of values and culture upholding the claim mentioned has to address this hidden implication at the very outset. But that very task is self defeating in the present day scenario of scientific theories of evolution, whether physical or biological, since the philosophical approach based on any such theories has to absolve man of any absolute responsibility as to his socio cultural existence. This is patent in the materialist/reductionist traditions of the West and latent in other approaches as well. The question remains then, what/who is man?, and how he is to be placed in the world or against it?.

When we analyze the phrase 'rational animal' believed to be coined by Aristotle in the ancient time, we come to realize that the phrase fits more naturally in to the modern scenario in the field of philosophy, especially within the optimistic rationalist picture of man as an intelligent being, rather the only intelligent being, cast as the cognizing subject against the mechanistically determined and objective world 'out there'!. Though Rene Descartes, the founding father of this modern view had to resort to the idea of a creator God for endowing this noble creature with the capacity of rational thought, the Cartesian spirit has over time outgrown that logical limitation and assumed the full implication of the premise in suggesting a fully mechanical explanation of the entire existence in terms of Newtonian physics, casting aside the anthropocentric view and proposing thereby the inessentiality of human existence to the rest of reality!

In fact the Cartesian idea of 'the thinking substance' is a double edged knife, in as much as it has in it the implication that if man could be thought of as being capable of rational thought, with the reality of the world being just accidental to his being, what is the purpose of a creator god anymore? Because rational thinking itself is creative!. But the ingenuity that Descartes showed in circumventing this logical necessity is what prime element of suspicion as to the honesty of the very epistemological project of him!

Reading this conveniently into the fact that Descartes was a contemporary of ill fated Galileo, and seeing for ourselves how this possibility was developed in the later thought of modernism, we can sense how brutally was all divinity and spirituality shed off human existence by the logical fruition of the Cartesian project!

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Now, out of the two options, that is, either man be treated as just another thing in nature or nature be treated as being constituted by the rational human thought, the course of scientific discourse has opted the former, leading to a materialist-reductionist strategy.

But the developments that took place during the last few centuries have changed drastically the scientific view of the universe and replaced the 'clockwork mechanism' with the idea of an ever evolving universe which had its origin in a big bang somewhere in the distant past!. Alongside this has developed the idea that humans are just another species that evolved in the long process of biological evolution that started with the emergence of life on earth, probably in water in the form of unicellular organisms. Thus if theories from evolutionary biology are taken at their face value, it would be no exaggeration to say that humans are nothing but sophisticated apes! I do not intend to get into the merits of these most accepted and official views, but they have undoubtedly brought back into focus the problem of man's place in the universe!

If we are just sophisticated apes, forming just a link in the long chain of evolution, then there is nothing so special about our values and practices that demand any reflection on them!. But our experience speaks loud against this proposition in as much as man has proved to be creative rather than simply procreative in the course of life!. So there are two tenable options before us.

The first is to return to the Cartesian view of man to be 'res cogitan' capable of rationalizing his own very existence in tune with the existence of an almighty God and his/her purposes, into which there is no scope of the latest scientific revelations being accommodated.

The other is to remain agnostic as to the existence of any such God or purpose and take a descriptive stance towards the whole of existence. Then the whole of scientific advances which have already been made and which are likely to be made in future could be easily accommodated into this worldview. Precisely this has largely been the stance taken by the scientific fraternity at least from the beginning of the last century. And this attitude is still maintained among them without turning out to be any hindrance to their course of action, rather giving further impetus to it.

Now the question arises, can a philosophical engagement take off from the same or a similar metaphysical standpoint?. This question assumes high importance in the wake of the prevalent trend especially in the analytical circles to align philosophy with the sciences in its method and focus. This observation requires a little bit of elaboration.

As to the method, philosophy has for long stuck to a kind of spectatorial stance towards the world, irrespective of whether the world is 'out there' constituted in matter or 'in here' constituted in ideas!. Until the emergence of Existential Phenomenology, western philosophy seems never to have got freed from the grip of subject-object dichotomy, apart from the very occasional aberrations in the form of Hegelian thought and its ramifications. Even when the sciences underwent the 'paradigm shift' necessitated by later revelations, western philosophy seems to have not even thought about any such 'paradigm shift' in its approach, other than the rebellion brought about by the Existentialists and its echo in the thought of the so called Post-Structuralists.

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As to the focus, clearly western philosophy has long remained under the impression that philosophy revolves primarily around 'the problem of knowledge'. The voluminous literature it has produced in that endeavor testifies for this claim, making any further substantiation irrelevant. And in fact the adamancy in method referred to above, has been just a byproduct of this fundamental stance!

Now it's high time that this position be re-looked into. If we get down to the roots of the problem of knowledge, we can see that the very problem arises out of a feeling of alienation of man from the world!. Without this threat being invoked by science, language, or even metaphysical speculation the problem of knowledge cannot arise at all! And interestingly it is the same threat which leads to any sort of ethical enquiries, values, culture and religion. Then the problem of alienation turns out to be the proper focus of philosophy.

So it is in this context that the questions raised at the beginning as to man's place in and relation to nature are to be properly addressed. But unfortunately one can't remain very optimistic about the western philosophy serving this purpose due largely to the reasons cited so far. However, in the East, especially in Indian Philosophy, these issues are addressed in a unique way, elevating altogether the 'being of man' to a different level. The rest of the paper is dedicated to elucidating this view.

At the very outset, the etymological difference in the terms used in the two systems to denote the world has to be highlighted. 'Prakriti' is the word used in Indian philosophy to denote the world/nature. It should be noted that though it has been used as an equivalent to the term 'nature', the etymological difference between the two is significant for a proper understanding of the usage of the term in Indian philosophy. Etymologically 'prakriti' means 'that which was always there' or that which was there even prior to 'kriti' or creation. Now this very idea in the Indian context gets rid of any need of conceptualizing a creator God any further, though in various Indian systems, there have surely been conceptions of creator Gods according to the intellectual and spiritual temperaments of various system builders. In every system in Indian philosophy, this conception of the world as 'prakriti' is undergoing change according to the law called 'rta', though there are difference of opinion as to the mode of change, which broadly consist in three different views vide, 1) change as cyclic, 2) change as linear and 3) change as unreal.

But irrespective of these differences as to the nature of the world, there is a broad consensus as to the view that man's embodied existence in and as part of this world is largely owing to his 'karma' of the past lives, and as a bearer of these 'karma' there is something in man, viz. his Soul/Atman which is neither a part of nature nor governed by the physical laws of it, but still is the same light which illuminates both man and nature and the same reality which grounds both.

Thus man's place in the world, to start with, is of a dual nature. He is conceived simultaneously to be a part of it and transcending it. But unlike in the west this conception doesn't lead to any kind of deadlock, because it forms only the steppingstone to a higher holistic and integral conception of the being of man in the world which is attained through an evolutionary process culminating in the same.

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As with the case of other founding principles of various Indian systems, the Upanishads are the source of the idea of this evolutionary process as well.

In the taittiriya Upanishad, forming part of the Krishna Yajur Veda as the 'siksha valli', 'ananda valli' and 'brgu valli' parts of the corresponding 'Aranyakam', the idea is presented in poetic charm in the doctrine of the five sheaths or 'koshas'. More important is the harmonious scheme of unraveling the genealogy of the Atman through a theory of evolution of nature!

As Paul Deussen describes the process in his celebrated translation: "through the elements-through earth, plants, food, semen- down to the creation of man, who is no doubt the material man (annarasamaya purusa); through this the essential nature of this Atman is ascertained but together with this the problem has been raised viz. to investigate the true essence and the deepest nature of the Atman in the physical man as well as that covered in the sheath . And here the deeper and still deeper penetrating thought draws off from man one sheath after another – the annarasamaya, pranamaya, manomaya, and vijnanamaya purusa, until finally by peeling off other sheaths it arrives at the anandamaya as the innermost core of man and the deepest and the ultimate nature of the Atman. This peeling off of sheaths of the Atman out of man is however at the same time such as holds good in the case of the whole nature ; the annarasamaya, pranamaya, manomaya, and vijnanamaya purusas are as well realized in the whole world of creation as in man, as it already becomes evident that at the conclusion of Anuvaaka 8 , the promise is held out to the man of knowledge to the effect that after death he would attain, in gradual steps , to the annamaya, pranamaya, manomaya, vijnanamaya , anandamaya stages. There are also many other signs which point out that these five purusas or Atmans or sheaths veiling one after another , are to be sought as much in the whole of nature as in the case of individual man and one must , therefore, always hold this significance being present in the cosmic as well as the psychical sphere."

At the objective level the lowest stratum is that of matter, ie annamaya, the purpose of which is fulfilled only when life is evolved, which characterizes the biological plane- the pranamaya kosha. The next stage of evolution is mind or perceptual consciousness- the manomaya kosha, which is shared by lower animals with man. This consciousness is indistinctive, consequently lacks the subject-object dichotomy, and therefore is not rational. The fourth is the rational phase, the vijnanamaya kosha which only humans attain to. The relational, analytical, discursive and dichotomous intellect is evolved at this level. But the evolutionary process can't rest at this level, since it's ultimate purpose is fulfilled only when this dichotomy transcends itself to attain to the non-dual bliss which is non discursive too.

At the subjective level, in the annamaya and pranamaya kosha, that is the inanimate and animate material sheaths of existence, man is viewed as a part of nature to the extent that he is embodied, subject to the physical laws. Through the manomaya and vijnanamaya kosha he is supposed to discover that his existence in relation to nature is based on a moral law and it has the purpose of transcending itself to the highest plane of self realization-the realization that the reality within and without is one and the same!

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Thus in Indian philosophy, man is not just a 'sophisticated ape' but the microcosm which existentially reflects the macrocosm that is the universe, while the former is subject to the law of 'karma', the later is subject to the moral order 'rta'. And in this scheme the problem of alienation is constructively addressed and resolved in a unique way, which not only harmonizes human existence with the rest of nature, but also fills it with meaning and purpose and making him absolutely responsible as to his socio cultural existence.