

Evaluating the Concepts of *Brahman Atman* and the intrinsic value of nature in Hindus' Discourse on Human-Nature Relation and Environmental Change

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ABSTRACT

For years, adherents and scholars of Hinduism have subconsciously or unintentionally created a psychological impression that Hindus' religious beliefs and ethical principles on human-nature relations are without flaws and perhaps the most suitable panacea to the global existential problem of environmental change. As plausible as this notion appears on face value, this paper brings to the fore the immanent lacunas in the Hindu view of human-nature relations. The paper is specifically aimed at pointing out the ontological dangers associated with the religious belief in the equality of all beings (sentient and non-sentient) as enshrined in the principle of Brahman Atman. It also exposes the implication of stating categorically that nature has an absolute intrinsic value which must be protected by all possible means. To achieve this objective, the paper adopts the phenomenological tool in analyzing the subject under consideration and employs the secondary research method of gathering information by using online and hard copy journal articles and existing textbooks on the subject and other related matters. The paper culminates by stating that, ontologically, all beings are not equal and that though nature has an intrinsic value based on its mode of existence and its spiritual connection, denying its instrumental value will make us not be true to ourselves.

Keywords: *Brahman; intrinsic value; Human-Nature Relations; Environmental Change.*

INTRODUCTION

Generally, the common notion amongst scholars of religious studies is that a good number of traditional (indigenous) religions are environment-friendly and their religious ethical beliefs about nature could be used as a paradigm and panacea to the environmental crisis in each region or continent of the world. For instance, (Chakraborty et al., 2017) posits that [Hindu] religio-cultural heritage contains ample resources relevant to deep ecology. It teaches adherents to admire nature, thereby living in a peaceful relationship with it. It also teaches them to give nature the respect and importance it deserves. Narrowing it down to the African continent, (Onah et al., 2016) assert that African traditional religion has created eco-friendly structures, practices, and sanctions that have been of enormous benefit in protecting the environment. These ideas have been a huge help to them when it comes to treating their environment with respect.

However, concerning the ultimate source of the global environmental crisis, the consensus amongst scholars is that it is as a result of the human-centered approach to human-nature relations, specifically due to humans' interference with the ecological balance [harmony] of the universe through excessive exploitation of nature. This attitude of overexploitation of the natural environment by man was borne out of the quasi-scientific phantasm or preconception that nature has an innate capacity to replace itself. According to (Wise & Koob, 2014), human exploration of nature was initially limited to a sufficiency level of consumption; such exploration conditioned the maintenance of natural balance. The reason for this is that nature has the capacity for self-reproduction at a level where human

consumption has remained below that level and there has been no report on environmental change. Gandhi was right when he said that “mother nature has enough for our needs, but not enough for us to be greedy” (Cheung & Bauer, 2021). (John & Nnadozie, 2021) also explain that prior to the present era of human civilization, there was harmony between traditional man and nature; this was occasioned by their pantheistic view of nature and their view of nature as a connector between divinity and the human race. They did not place much emphasis on the economic benefits of nature; rather, much emphasis was placed on eco-spirituality. The paradigm shift from this eco-spirituality (a nature-centered view) to a human-centered perception of human-nature relations has brought a severe global environmental crisis.

As scholars around the world are searching for a panacea (science-based or religious) to this existential problem (environmental crisis), scholars of Hinduism are advocating for the adoption of Hindu environmental ethical principles as a paradigm for human-nature relations in and beyond India. The premise for this assertion is that, ontologically, Hindus believe that all beings (sentient and non-sentient) are equal because they are from the same origin and possess the same component called *atman* (Ravikanth, 2021). Therefore, if and only if contemporary humans acknowledge this ontological equality and conduct their economic and industrial activities bearing in mind that the ecological balance depends solely on this belief, then the global environmental crisis will be reduced to its barest minimum.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims at exposing the dangers inherent in the above ontological perception of human-nature relations in Hinduism. It also points out the contradictions inherent in the religious belief and practice of *atman* and the caste system in India. Though the paper corroborates Hindus’ view of the intrinsic value of nature, it further holds that denying nature’s instrumental value would make us not be true to ourselves. As (Odum, 2014) rightly observed, man’s relationship with his natural environment is a complex one. While he is subject to certain natural controls and events, he also acts as the dominant force in many of the earth’s physical and biological systems. The paper concludes that all beings are not equal, but rather every being is important in its mode of existence. And to maintain the needed ecological balance, humans should respect the natural symbiosis regardless of the ontological hierarchy of beings.

THE DISCOURSE ON THE ONTOLOGY AND HIERARCHY OF BEINGS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION, CHRISTIANITY, AND HINDUISM

Our aim of exposing the immanent lacunas in the Hindus’ concept of *atman* and the preconception of the intrinsic value of nature would not be effectively achieved if we failed to critically analyze the general argument of being and the hierarchy of being. It is imperative to note that the discourse on human-nature relations is a core issue in metaphysics and ontology and a secondary issue in ethics. Therefore, to have a full grasp or an in-depth understanding of the ethical debate on human-nature relations, whether religious or philosophical, the reader must understand the foundation or the origin of the problem, and this is found in metaphysic (ontology), the study of being. Interestingly, the reason for the lengthy debate on the discourse on human-nature relations is the controversy surrounding the discourse, as there is no consensus about the place of man in the universe.

The argument for being (ontology) predates contemporary intellectual pursuits. Previously, it was widely assumed that its origins could be traced back to the ancient period of Greek philosophy, specifically to Thales of Miletus. Western history has it that each of the Ionian scholars was concerned with the search for the ultimate (being) stuff of the universe, that is, the being from which all beings emanate (O’grady, 2017). But there was a

shift of attention from this pursuit to the focus on man as a being in the universe. This shift was initiated by the ancient Greek itinerant scholar called the Sophist. Nevertheless, scholars from different parts of the world have challenged this Western ethnocentric history by projecting diverse ancient traditional perceptions of being. Hence, scholars have categorized the discourse into three, namely, Western, African, and Oriental notions of being. The fundamental question is, what is being?

As compared to other terms with diverse meanings and definitions, there is a consensus amongst scholars as to the meaning of being. In the words of (Agbakoba, 2008), being is anything that exists, whether living (sentient) or non-living (non-sentient). That is, all plants, animals, insects, and inanimate objects are called beings. The debate actually has nothing to do with the meaning of being but with the structure (hierarchy) and categories (physical and transcendental) of being or being with intrinsic and instrumental value. For Western (Christian) and African Traditional Religion scholars, there is an accurately designed structure (hierarchy) of being, and the non-interference of this structure is what determines the ecological balance of the universe. According to (Uduigwomen, 2009), Africans have a hierarchy of beings with God at the apex, followed by the ancestors, and then lesser gods, or deities. Then we have spirits, man, and finally animals and plants. Though in the Western Christian worldview, ancestors and deities are not in the hierarchy of beings, God is at the apex. He is regarded as a transcendental, infinite, absolute, and immortal being, followed by angels, man (it is believed that man shares some attributes with God), animals, and plants. These religions both hold an anthropocentric view of human-nature relations; that man, though higher than animals and plants in the hierarchy of beings, is duty bound to them (the notion of stewardship). It is pertinent to note that the concept of the hierarchy of beings does mean that animals and plants are less important. Traditional Africans believe that all beings are important and that there exists a harmonious, interdependent relationship between these beings. When humans upset this balance, “people experience misfortune and suffering or fear that the deities will strike them. Making sacrifices and offerings is a psychological device to restore this ontological balance” (Mbiti, 1990, p. 94). The crux, or central idea, of the hierarchy of beings is to project the distinction amongst these beings in terms of the components and attributes of each being.

On the other hand, the Hindus’ ontology is a complex one. Unlike in Christian and African Traditional Religion ontology, where the category of beings is clearly defined, the category of beings in Hinduism remains ambiguous. According to (Maharaj, 2015), “Hinduism is as difficult for the uninitiated to understand as quantum physics for the layperson”. There is this misconception or contradiction amongst a myriad of scholars concerning the belief in the existence of one Supreme Being in Hinduism. This misconception emanates from the interpretation or meaning of the term “Brahman” (p. 74). While for some scholars, Brahman is the ultimate reality, as in the case of (Edet, 2002).

Ultimately reality is one and only one. This ultimate reality is Brahman. Every other thing is part of Brahman and a manifestation of Brahman, and this includes human beings as well as animals, trees and inanimate objects. Brahman transcends time, space and causality and cannot be comprehended by human thought. ...it is absolutely unknowable by any concept, however universal; not even by the concept of being, so that it must be called nothing or non-being (p. 53).

Here we find that this scholar did not describe Brahman as a being or God but acknowledged its existence. In the words of (Von Hagen, 1958), the Hindus have represented God in innumerable forms. This, they say, is appropriate. Each is but a symbol that points to

something beyond, and as none exhausts the fullness of God's actual nature, the entire array can be regarded as depicting God in his innumerable aspects and manifestations.

Although in Hindu religious beliefs, Brahman is a vital concept, it has nothing to do with worship. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that "Hindu mythology attributes the assignment of creating the material universe to a *supreme being*, source, or essence – Brahman, identified with the sacred syllable OM or AUM" (Beck, 2019). This group here ascribed the attribute of a Supreme Being to Brahman. (Maharaj, 2015) referred to Paramatma as the Supreme Being. At the beginning of every cosmic cycle, Paramatma (the Absolute) breathes the divine words into the mind of Brahma (the Creator), and these sound vibrations result in the creation of the world. Here, Brahman is also described as the creator of the universe. The author contradicted himself by stating again that "Brahman, the one eternal and unchanging Being, has existed always." It is the time continuum from which the universe of matter appears and disappears at random." He sometimes used these words interchangeably. The veracity of the matter is that Hindus believe in the existence of a Supreme Being but lack words to describe what it is and a name to call it. In Hindu religious belief, Brahman is one of the pantheon of gods who are thought to exist as the underlying reality of all beings.

Therefore, in Hindu ontology, there is no hierarchy of beings, though some human beings have some significant features in Hindu ontology, but they are not higher than other beings. For instance, (Von Hagen, 1958) posits that underlying man's personality and animating it is a reservoir of being that never dies, is never exhausted, and is without limit in awareness and bliss. Hindus do not believe that man is created in the image of God, but that man is God. Man is divine. These infinite characteristics of man are the result of the Atman-Brahman component. Atman-Brahman in humans is what makes them immortal, and this is the rationale for the belief in Karma Samsara (reincarnation) (Anikeeva, 2018). The truth is that, generally, Hindus hold that all beings, sentient (human beings, plants, and animals) and non-sentient (inanimate objects) are made up of *Atman-Brahman*. This is the kernel of the principle of equality and pantheism in Hinduism.

For instance, the Hindu pantheistic view of nature has been criticized by many. For instance, (Edet, 2002) asked, "if human consciousness is part of the universal consciousness which is God, the Absolute, Brahman, one wonders why the individual man's consciousness is itself unconscious of this fact" (p. 53). This will be the discussion for the next segment where the paper critically analyzes the discourse of Hindus' perception of human-nature relations and environmental change. The Hindu pantheistic view of God and nature is the substratum of Hindu environmental ethics, which serves as a solution to the existential problem of environmental change.

Is The Discourse on Human-Nature Relations in Hinduism a Panacea to Global Environmental Change?

One such religion is Hinduism. The global existential problem of environmental change has propelled many religious scholars and adherents to look inward at their various religions for those beliefs and practices that encourage environmentally friendly attitudes and natural resource management as the scientific solutions seem to be inadequate. Like most traditional religions, it has been established that Hinduism is environment-friendly. It holds that nature has an intrinsic value. The general outlook on Hindu environmental ethics is that it is environment-centered. (Sinha & Nathawat, 1997) asserts that "reverence for nature and its creations is the unifying ethical principle in almost all religions of India. They have all kept "nature above man" (p. 326). Hindu environmental ethics holds that "human

beings have no special privilege or authority over other creatures; on the other hand, they have more obligations and duties.” This is contrary to African Traditional Religion, which holds an anthropocentric environmental ethical principle. According to (Okoye, 2012), the African concept of the environment is human-centered. This perception, wherein values possessed by animals and plants are dependent on human usefulness, contrasts with the environment-centered system where it is believed that animals and plants have intrinsic values.

The rationale behind the Hindu environment-centered principle of environmental ethics as opposed to an anthropocentric view is the ontological equality of all beings. As we have seen earlier, Hindus believe that all beings, sentient and non-sentient, are made up of the same component, *Brahman-Atman*. All sentient and non-sentient beings are part of nature and made of the same types of substances (chemical elements). These elements are shared between the living and non-living components of the environment through “nutrient cycling” (Awasthi, 2021). Humans possess the same *atman* as plants and animals, which is why humans reincarnate either as animals or insects. Regardless of the principle of equality, from critical evaluation, it would not be an aberration to say that Hinduism places more priority on plants and animals than human beings. “Only God has absolute sovereignty over all creatures; thus human beings have no dominion over their own lives or non-human lives.” As a result, humanity cannot act as God’s viceroy over the planet, nor can it assign relative worth to other species.” Humans owe nature the duty or responsibility of respecting and caring for nature. The responsibilities humans owe nature could be said to be one of the reasons Hindus are vegetarians. Based on the doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-violence), many observant Hindus oppose the institutionalized breeding and killing of animals, birds, and fish for human consumption (Cronon, 2011). The majority of Hindus, those living in urban and rural areas of the country and beyond, are vegetarians. Over that “it was observed that the demand for meat with the increasing economic status of people in India does not increase as fast as in other parts of the world due to religious reasons” (p. 30).

The Hindu discourse on human-nature relations can clearly be understood through the view of eco-spirituality. Hindus believe that God is nature (*Deus natura*), which is commonly called pantheism. We mentioned earlier that Hindus do not have a name for the Supreme Being, and we have explained the misconception surrounding the term “*Brahman*.” We did say that *Brahman* is neither a being nor a non-being, but it is transcendental, it has nothing to do with space and time, and it is the ultimate reality. Hindus’ perception of human-nature relations is symbiotic: as humans need nature to survive, so does nature need man to survive. None is more important than the other. Thus, unlike some religions where adherents see nature as a means to an end, Hindus perceive nature as an end in itself. To a Hindu, nature is a connector of Divinity (transcendental) and humanity (material), in the parlance of Aristotle, Act and Potency, respectively. In other words, Hindus’ relationship with nature is spiritual; they accord respect to nature asserts that the worship of trees, animals, forests, rivers, and the sun, as well as considering the earth itself as a Mother Goddess, are part of the Indian tradition. Hindus revere these entities because, to them, they are the means or medium by which *Brahman* is made manifest. The fundamental question is what these have to do with the solution to environmental change.

We have established that the cause of the global environmental crisis is over exploitation of nature borne out of the perception that nature has the capacity to reproduce or restore itself and the human-centered view of human-nature relations. But, Gandhi has rightly warned the entire human race that though Mother Nature has enough resources for our needs, it does not have enough for humans’ greed. With the pantheistic view of nature,

traditional Hindus have been able to manage their natural resources, especially sacred trees and animals. The religious perception of the value of trees has made India one of the top countries as regards the net value of trees. Again, the religious view of the cow as a sacred animal has increased the number of cows in India. Cows have always had a special place in the Hindu religious consciousness... Cows are considered an auspicious member of the household and are worshipped as mothers. India has the largest cattle holdings in the world, though per capita milk yield is rather low (Chakraborty et al., 2017).

Gandhi and other Hindu scholars attribute the cause of the environmental crisis in India to the Western paradigm of industrialization and urbanization. Like traditional Africans, ancient Hindus were able to curtail environmental degradation in India using their eco-spiritual notion of human-nature relations. With this empirical evidence of the effect of Hindu religious beliefs on environmental management, argue that “to make global human activity more sustainable requires an examination and potential return of the values, beliefs, and ethics that drive human beings and their relationship with the natural environment” (p. 63).

A CRITIQUE OF HINDUS ONTOLOGICAL PERCEPTION OF HUMAN-NATURE RELATION

According to Hindu religious belief, all beings (sentient and non-sentient) are ontologically equal on the premise that they are made up of the same reality, *Brahman Atman*. The logical implication is that, since it has been established that human beings possess intrinsic (are not means to an end), plants and animals also possess intrinsic because, ontologically, they are components of the same ultimate reality. This argument can be expressed using the Aristotelian syllogism:

All beings made up of Brahman Atman are equal.

Humans, plants, and animals are components of the Brahman Atman.

Therefore, humans, plants, and animals are equal.

As illogical as this religious belief sounds ontologically, there are immanent flaws. To begin with, the Hindu religio-socio-cultural structure of Hindu society does reflect this religious belief. For centuries, traditional Hindus have been practicing the caste system, a social structure with a religious foundation. (Edet, 2002) posits that in the Hindu scriptures, there is a description of how caste first came from Brahman, the supreme principle. The priests, Brahmins, came from his mouth; the warriors, Ksatriyas, from his breast; the craftsmen, Vaisyas, from his thighs; and the laborers, Sudras, from his feet. The argument here is that since Hindus believe that humans are not equal regardless of the ultimate reality inherent in all human beings, Thus, it would be an aberration to state categorically that humans and non-beings are ontologically equal. Though all beings are composites of Brahman Atman, there are other ontological features that distinguish them from each other. For instance, a man and a woman are creations of God Almighty and they both share some vital ontological features, but these do not imply that they are ontologically equal.

The Hindu religious belief in *Brahman Atman* as the underlying reality of all beings does not necessitate the conclusion that all beings are ontologically equal. Rather, the concept of *Brahman Atman* implies that all beings, in their various or diverse modes of existence, are important. All non-human entities (plants, animals, and inanimate objects), whether sacred or not, are special or have unique features that distinguish them from other beings that make up reality as a whole. We can invariably argue, using (Asouzu, 2007) paradigm, that all beings are important because they are the missing link in reality. A missing

link is the mode through which being can be grasped within any given framework of finite determination, as it can only be grasped in relations. What we are saying in essence is that human and non-human beings are not ontologically equal but all important as their symbiotic relationships necessitate the needed ecological equilibrium in the universe.

Again, the assertion of the intrinsic value of non-human entities in the Hindu religious perception of human nature is definitely acceptable. However, the negation of nature's instrumental value by adherents and scholars of Hinduism is an overrating of nature, which has its own implications. Beyond reasonable doubt, nature has an intrinsic value which must be guarded jealously and judiciously by human beings, but denying the fact that nature is also a means to an end implies that human beings are self-sufficient. Naturally, human beings solely depend on nature for their existence. If we then say that because nature has an intrinsic value as such, it should not be explored (consumed) by man, this will invariably pose a serious threat to human existence and undermine one of the significant functions of nature. Numerous Hindu religious rites and rituals require the use of animals and plants as sacrifices to appease their pantheon of deities believed to exist.

CONCLUSION

The paper suggests that Hindus' religious perception of human-nature relations is a commendable solution to the global existential problem of environmental change. The ontological argument that all beings are composed of *Brahman Atman* (the ultimate reality) indicates that every being is unique and important in their different modes of existence. As such, plants and animals should be treated with the utmost respect. Hindus' religious belief in *Brahman Atman* brings to light the danger associated with over-exploitation of nature by humans. That environmental degradation destroys not only the physical properties of nature but also the ontological ecological equilibrium needed. The paper corroborates Gandhi's view that though nature has sufficient resources for man's survival, it does not have enough for man's excesses. Therefore, when exploring nature, humans should remember that the condition of nature determines the condition of their existence. Though nature is a means to an end, it also has an intrinsic value worth protecting.

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