Plato's Chariot vs. The Vedantic Chariot: Two Very Similar but Importantly Different Images of Human Nature

By
Jeffrey Gold
Professor Emeritus, East Tennessee State University
December 12, 2024

Abstract

The Axial Age (approximately 800 BCE-200 BCE) was a turning point in human history. In China, India, Persia, the Near East, and Greece, the intellectual and spiritual foundations of humanity were undergoing a significant revolution in thought. Philosopher Karl Jaspers introduced the term "Axial Age" in his 1949 book, *The Origin and Goal of History*. Jaspers said: "The spiritual foundations of humanity were laid simultaneously and independently in China, India, Persia, Judea, and Greece. And these are the foundations upon which humanity still subsists today." In China, Confucianism and Taoism were born. In India, *The Upanishads* and *The Bhagavad Gita* were written, and Yoga was taught orally. The Buddha established Buddhism, and Jainism began. In Persia, Zoroaster founded a new religion. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the prophets of ancient Israel preached. And in Greece, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle introduced philosophy in the West. Jaspers believed that these different traditions occurred concurrently but developed separately. He also thought that the different traditions had similar concerns, and often, similar views. In this essay, I will look at two famous images from the Axial Age, both intended to illustrate and elucidate a view about human nature: Plato's chariot in his dialogue *Phaedrus* and the chariot in *Katha Upanishad.* Although there are similarities in the two representations, there are profound differences. I would like to suggest that these differences help us understand fundamental discrepancies between Asian and Western conceptions of human nature.

Plato's Chariot vs. The Vedantic Chariot: Two Very Similar but Importantly Different Images of Human Nature

By
Jeffrey Gold
Professor Emeritus, East Tennessee State University

I sat me down to write a simple story
Which maybe in the end became a song
The words have all been writ by one before me
We're taking turns in trying to pass them on
Oh, we're taking turns in trying to pass them on

Procol Harum, "Pilgrim's Progress"

Introduction

The Axial Age (approximately 800 BCE-200 BCE) was a turning point in human history. In China, India, Persia, the Near East, and Greece, the intellectual and spiritual foundations of humanity were undergoing a significant revolution in thought. Religious historian Karen Armstrong called it "The Great Transformation". Philosopher Karl Jaspers introduced the term "Axial Age" in his 1949 book, *The Origin and Goal of History*. Jaspers said: "The spiritual foundations of humanity were laid simultaneously and independently in China, India, Persia, Judea, and Greece. And these are the foundations upon which humanity still subsists today." In China, Confucianism and Taoism were born. In India, *The Upanishads* and *The Bhagavad Gita* were written, and Yoga was taught orally (scholars disagree about the dating of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*). The Buddha established Buddhism, and Jainism began. In Persia, Zoroaster founded a new religion. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the prophets of ancient Israel preached. And in Greece, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle introduced philosophy in the West. Jaspers believed that these different traditions occurred concurrently but developed separately. He also thought that the different traditions had similar concerns, and often, similar views. In this essay, I will look at two famous images from the Axial Age, both intended to illustrate and elucidate a view about human nature: Plato's chariot in his dialogue *Phaedrus* and the chariot in *Katha Upanishad.* Although there are similarities in the two representations, there are profound differences. I would like to suggest that these differences help us understand fundamental discrepancies between Asian and Western conceptions of human nature.

Coming to America

Jaspers emphasized that the ideas advanced in the Axial age serve as foundations for humanity today. This is certainly true in contemporary America. As an American who grew up during the 1950s and 1960s, I was not merely influenced by the theories proposed during the birth of Western philosophy in Athens, but by the migration of philosophies from India to America in the late 19th and early-to mid-20th centuries. Beginning with Swami Vivekananda's address to the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 through Paramahansa Yogananda's arrival in Boston in 1920 where he founded Self-Realization Fellowship, to Maharishi Mahesh

Yogi's arrival in the USA in the late 1950s where he introduced Transcendental Meditation, the principles of Indian spirituality gained a foothold in America. Subsequently, Americans like Richard Alpert (Ram Dass) traveled to India in 1967. He studied with Neem Karoli Baba. Upon his return, he wrote the groundbreaking book *Be Here Now.* That book had a profound influence on the counterculture during the 1960s and 70s. In 1968, the Beatles travelled to India and studied with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. In their song, "Across the Universe", they chant "Jai guru deva, Aum". George Harrison also studied with A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada and learned sitar from Ravi Shankar. In his hit "My Sweet Lord", he chants "Hara Krishna" and "Hara Rama." He wrote the Beatles song, "Within You Without You" where we find the lyrics "When you've seen beyond yourself then you may find Peace of mind is waiting there." These snippets are only a tiny fraction of the tremendous influence India had on modern American Culture. Yoga studios can be found in almost every American city, our bookstores have seemingly more books on Asian philosophy than Western philosophy, and meditation centers are a staple of our culture.

As contemporary Americans, we are faced with two competing accounts of who we are. These models can be traced back to the Axial Age. One comes from Plato, the other comes from the *Upanishads* of India. These images have similar features, but also significant differences. In what follows, I will try to clarify these two representations.

Plato's Chariot

Socrates lived from 470 BCE-399 BCE in Athens. He didn't write, but he was the self-proclaimed "gadfly" (*Apology* 30e) whose mission was to sting his fellow citizens into deeper introspection and clearer thought through the technique of "Socratic questioning." He was charged with corrupting the youth and disbelieving in the Olympic gods and tried before 501 citizen jurors. In a close vote, he was found guilty. There were actually two votes. Although the one for guilt or innocence was close, the vote for execution (once he was found guilty) was not close. Plato (427 BCE-347 BCE) was his most famous student. After Socrates' execution, Plato spent the rest of his life writing dialogues in memory of his teacher. In almost all the dialogues, Socrates was the main speaker. Plato's early (Socratic) dialogues centered on human excellence or *arete.* These early dialogues are thought to be representations of how Socrates spoke with his interlocutors. They are also thought to represent what Socrates believed. In the later (Platonic) dialogues, Socrates is almost always the main speaker. However, these dialogues are believed to represent Plato's thought. These later dialogues are much wider in scope and address issues concerning the nature of reality, human nature, human excellence, political theory, cosmology, aesthetics, the afterlife, the nature of human knowledge, philosophy of education, and virtually every other issue one might find in a philosophy course.

The Platonic dialogues that deal most directly with human nature are *Phaedo, Republic, and Phaedrus.* Many scholars believe that *Phaedrus* was the last of those dialogues. It contains the chariot image and is possibly his most mature picture of human nature.

The earliest of the three dialogues listed above is *Phaedo.* It is Plato's version of the final day of Socrates' life. It is a discussion between Socrates and his friends who visited him in prison and

concludes with a moving description of his final moments. Socrates is often thought to be the mouthpiece of Plato in this dialogue. Socrates presents a view of human nature that is called dualism. The idea is that a person is a combination of a soul (*psyche*) and a body (*soma*). The body contains all the desires, passions, and emotions. In Homeric times, *psyche* was a word associated with breath, wind, smoke, and life. It is the life principle or life force which animates the body. With the final breath, the *psyche* departs the body and the body remains lifeless. For Plato, the *psyche* is also considered the seat of reason and thinking. So, for Plato, the soul has two roles. It brings life or animates a body, and, in human beings, it thinks and reasons. Additionally, Plato stated that the body is changing, mortal, temporary, and mutable. He believed that anything that is born must die. However, the soul is unchanging, immortal, immutable, and eternal. It is never born and never dies. In the *Phaedo,* the body is a temporary space suit (or more accurately, an earth suit) for the soul. He proposes a view of reincarnation in which the soul is reborn into new bodies after death or the separation of the soul from the old body. The bodies that souls end up in depend on how they lived their previous life. The important point, for Plato, is that **we are** the soul or *psyche*. We **merely wear** or live in or ride in a body. So, in the *Phaedo,* our basic nature is that of an eternal being capable of reason and thought. We **are** our rational intellect. Our emotions and passions are not us, but part of the dwelling we inhabit. Liberation, for Plato of the *Phaedo*, involves separation from and disidentification from the passions, emotions, and desires which tend to be licentious.

In the *Republic,* Plato's view seems to change. Perhaps the change is a result of Plato's desire to draw an analogy between the state and the individual soul. The state has three classes of citizens (a class of rulers, a class of warriors or soldiers, and the third class which includes everyone else or the ordinary citizens who produce food, clothing, shelter, etc.). To make the analogy between the state and the soul work, he proposes a tripartite soul. Reason is the analog of the rulers, desire is the analog of ordinary citizens, and spiritedness or *thymos* is the analog of the soldiers. *Thymos* is like the spirit of an exuberant horse. This spirit, in humans, is separate and distinct from both reason and desire because our spiritedness may side with desires when we excitedly chase after licentious pleasures, or *thymos* may side with reason whereby we enthusiastically follow the life of wisdom. One person may enthusiastically pursue gambling or drugs or erotic pleasures, while another may fervently pursue wisdom. The word *philosophy* literally means love (*philo*) of wisdom (*sophia*). Philosophers, according to Plato, are zealously drawn to the life of reason. Soldiers may side with the rulers to put down an insurrection, or they may side with the citizens and rebels to overthrow the rulers. Similarly, spirit or *thymos* might side with reason or it can side with desire. This, according to Plato, shows that *thymos* is distinct from both reason and desire and therefore constitutes a third part of the soul.

The image of human nature is different in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. In both cases a human being is a *psyche* or soul. But the nature of the soul changes. In the *Phaedo*, we are a soul, we are a reasoning eternal entity born into a bodily cage. In the *Phaedo*, desires and emotions exist in the body. He even speaks of the body as a place of imprisonment for the rational soul. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates repeatedly claims that the philosophical soul seeks release. Socrates

states (*Phaedo* 67d): "And the desire to free the soul is chiefly, or rather only, in the true philosopher. In fact, the philosopher's occupation consists precisely in the freeing and separation (*lusis kai chorismos*) of soul from body." In discussing purification, Socrates states that purification consists in (67c) "separating the soul as much as possible from the body." When that occurs, the soul is (67d) "freed from the shackles of the body." Later in the dialogue (82e-83a), Socrates sums up his view:

> Every seeker of wisdom knows that up to the time when philosophy takes it over his soul is a helpless prisoner, chained hand and foot in the body, compelled to view reality not directly but only through its prison bars, and wallowing in utter ignorance. And philosophy can see that the imprisonment is ingeniously produced by the prisoner's own active desire, which makes him first accessory to his own confinement. Well, philosophy takes over the soul in this condition and by gentle persuasion tries to set it free.

2500 years later, The Eagles echoed this theme of being responsible for our own confinement in "Hotel California" with the verse "Mirrors on the ceiling, pink champagne on ice, and she said, 'We are all prisoners here, of our own device.'"

Plato's image in the *Phaedo* of the soul as a "helpless prisoner, chained hand and foot in the body" is developed in the Allegory of the Cave (Republic VII 514a-518d). It is also found in the *Phaedrus* where Socrates says: "we are imprisoned like an oyster in its shell (250c)." The main point of all of this is that for the Plato of the *Phaedo*, we are a rational soul who seeks release from these unfortunate desires that are part of the suit we temporarily wear while traversing the earth. In the *Republic*, we are still a soul. But our nature has changed. Our soul now includes not merely reason, but also desire, passion, and enthusiasm or spirit. We are now the type of being who is not merely a rational being, but an emotional, passionate, desiring, and spirited being. The person who lives an excellent and happy life, according to the *Republic,* is able to harmonize these three aspects of himself or herself in such a way that they understand that reason should be the captain of the ship, and the spirited elements should aid reason in helping the desires to conform to reason.

When we get to the *Phaedrus*, the soul remains tripartite, and the three parts are very similar to his account in the *Republic*. It is in the *Phaedrus* that Plato introduces the chariot as a representation of the soul. Socrates says: "We will liken the soul to the composite nature of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer (246a)." One of the horses is white and "good and noble" while the other is dark and "quite the opposite (246b)." The charioteer represents reason. The good and noble horse represents the spirited element in the *Republic.* In the *Phaedrus,* the white horse is naturally inclined towards things that are healthy, beneficial, and advantageous. The dark horse represents the desire for things which bring temporary pleasure at the cost of being toxic, harmful, and detrimental.

The white horse is drawn toward knowledge, justice, and goodness or compassion. The dark horse is drawn towards pleasures that cause harm us such as junk food, drugs, and cigarettes. A

feature of the craving for such pleasure is insatiability. Plato had a lifelong concern with insatiable desires. In the *Gorgias*, he compared insatiable desires with a sieve that would never hold the water. People who have insatiable desires "are forced to fill the leaky containers day and night or else they suffer extreme pain (*Gorgias* 493e-494)." This is an excellent description of addiction. Once the addict comes down from a high, he or she requires another fix to refill what is now empty. In "Closer to Fine," The Indigo Girls sing "Well, darkness has a hunger that's insatiable, and lightness has a call that's hard to hear." Plato has a similar view. The noble and ignoble horses pull the chariot in opposite directions and the rational charioteer tries as hard as possible to steer them in a beneficial direction. The charioteer tries to direct them towards the Good. Some thinkers have postulated that Freud's three-part psyche is indebted to Plato (the id is the ignoble horse who seeks pleasure, the super-ego is the noble horse who represents societal morality, and the ego is the charioteer who mediates).

Picture generated by ChatGPT based on my instructions. Notice how the dark and light horses pull in opposite directions and the charioteer tries to control them. Since the entire image is our soul or true self, we can see it is a struggling self

The *Phaedrus* is a dialogue concerning love or *eros*. Plato holds that love is a kind of madness, but it can be directed in positive or negative ways. The chariot passage is long and complex. It deals with love, sexual addiction (quite explicitly), and reincarnation. For the purposes of this paper, however, we are only concerned with his characterization of human nature. In the chariot image, Plato makes it clear that the true self is a **struggling self.** We are a rational intellect that struggles with the battle between toxic desires and healthy ones. Our nature is to be rational, but also desiring, craving, lusting beings. That is who we are. The well lived life, for Plato, is the life in which the licentious, lustful, addictive pleasures are directed more positively. In my view of Plato, this is not out of the desire to purge ourselves of wickedness, but out of enlightened self-interest. Addictive pleasures are toxic or just plain harmful to us and others.

The chariot in *Katha Upanishad*

Katha Upanishad is ordinarily dated around the 5th Century BCE (about the same time that Socrates and Plato lived). The108 *Upanishads* are considered the philosophical and theological portion of the *Vedas.* They do not focus on rituals and ceremonies. Instead, they concentrate on spiritual wisdom and the seeking of release (*moksha*) from bondage. As we have seen, this is an important similarity to Plato, especially in the *Phaedo*. *Katha Upanishad* is one of the most central and important of the *Upanishads.* In it, Nachiketa (a teenage boy) and his father (Vajashravasa) have a heated argument in the opening scene. Vajashravasa becomes so enraged, he blurts out: "Go to hell!" to his son. Nachiketa obliges and goes to the underworld where he meets Yama, the king of death. Yama grants Nachiketa three boons. For the last boon, Nachiketa asks "What happens after death? Do we continue to live or not?" (Part I Section I). Yama's answer constitutes the remainder of the *Upanishad.*

In Part I, Section II, Yama draws a distinction between *preya* and *shreya.* *Preya* is temporary pleasure. *Shreya* is that which is genuinely beneficial. Eknath Easwaren's commentary on *Katha Upanishad* says:

> *Preya* what is pleasant, *Shreya*, what is beneficial. *Preya* is that which pleases us, that which tickles the ego. *Shreya*, on the other hand, has no reference to pleasing or displeasing. It simply means what benefits us—that which improves our health or contributes to our peace of mind.

This distinction is remarkably similar to Plato's noble and ignoble steeds, one who pursues pleasure, the other what is beneficial. At this point (Part I Section III), Yama introduces what I will call "The Vedantic Chariot" to distinguish it from the "Platonic Chariot". The Vedantic chariot is more complex than Plato's chariot.

Know the Self as Lord of the chariot,
The body as the chariot itself,
The discriminating intellect as
The charioteer, and the mind as the reins.
The senses, say the wise, are the horses,
Sense objects are the roads they travel.
(Part I Section III)

Picture generated by ChatGPT based on my instructions. In this image, the charioteer or intellect uses the reins or mind to steer the senses or horses. But the key is the passenger who simply observes what is happening.

Our body is the chariot, the five horses (there are only four in the illustration) are the five senses who travel the road of sense objects to which they are attracted. The charioteer or discriminating intellect or faculty of reasoning (*buddhi*) tries to steer the horses properly with the reins (the mind or *manas*). The reins connect the intellect to the senses. The reins can be directed by the intellect in a wise direction, or they can be pulled by the horses in a toxic direction. It seems that the reins are similar in function to desires and emotions which guide the senses to what they (the desires and emotions) are attracted to on the road travelled. In the case of both chariots, reason or discriminating intellect attempts to steer the desires and emotions. Some of us run headlong toward the casino or the crack house, while others towards the gym, the health food store and the library. Eknath Easwaren's commentary on *Katha Upanishad*, in discussing the power of the desires and senses, says "What is surprising is the power they have, I have seen a tiny palate, just a lot of microscopic taste buds, gallop into a bakery dragging a mountain of a man helplessly behind." At this point, it seems that Plato's Chariot is almost identical to the Vedantic chariot. Both present humans as struggling between toxic desires and healthy ones, reason or discriminating intellect pulling in one direction, and licentious desires for fleeting sense pleasures pulling in the other.

However, there is one important and significant difference. In the Vedantic Chariot, there is a passenger or the Lord of the Chariot. The passenger is the *Atman*, the true Self. In *Katha Upanishad*, and in all Vedantic thought, "The Supreme Self is beyond name and form, Beyond the senses, inexhaustible, without beginning, without end, beyond time, space, and causality, eternal, immutable." (Part I Section III) This may sound similar to Plato's description of the soul or the *psyche*, especially in the *Phaedo*, but there is a major difference. In Plato's *Phaedo*, the *psyche* is the rational intellect. In the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus,* it is the rational intellect and

the desires, emotions, and the *thymos*. But in *Katha Upanishad*, thinking, desiring, emoting, craving and enthusiastically pursuing are all parts of the vehicle, not the true Self. Easwaran describes it this way:

> But here is much more to the chariot image than this. When someone asks how tall we are, don't we all respond with something like: "Five foot seven"? If we have to describe ourselves we say, "I have blue eyes, brown hair, and a mole on my right cheek." Yama says, "Nonsense! Your *chariot* is five foot seven. Your chariot has blue eyes, brown hair, and a mole. You are not your chariot." And what about other statements we use so often? "I'm in a hurry." "I'm in a bad mood today." "I enjoy eating chocolate eclairs." Yama would retort "you're still talking about your vehicle. Your chariot is in a hurry, your chauffeur overreacts, your horses love eclairs. All this "I, I, I" is just confusion. You have forgotten who you really are.

The Vedantic Chariot image makes clear (although it is almost certainly counter-intuitive to Western sensibilities) that we are not our body, we are not our personality, we are not our social roles, we are not Geminis or Aquarians, we are not Caucasian or Black, we are not heterosexual or gay, we are not even Plato's rational intellect. We are the passenger on the chariot, the watcher on the hill, pure consciousness, or awareness. *Katha Upanishad* puts it this way:

> The light of the Atman, the Spirit, is invisible, concealed in all beings. It is seen by the seers of the subtle, when their vision is clean and clear… The Atman is beyond sound and form, **without touch and taste and perfume**, It is eternal, unchangeable, and without beginning or end: **indeed above reasoning**. When consciousness of the Atman manifests itself man becomes free from the jaws of death. (Emphasis mine)

For Plato, we **are** a rational intellect or a rational intellect that struggles with emotions and passions. For *Katha Upanishad*, that is all part of the mind body complex, our computer, our brain. Our true self is simply awareness or consciousness. It is really hard for those of us raised in Western Culture to grasp that. We think of ourselves as lawyers, intellectuals, football fans, emotional, talkative, hot-tempered, shy, Scientologists, grandparents, Americans, liberals, mystics, nurturers, anti-abortionists, etc. The list is endless. But in the Vedantic view, these are simply roles we play on the earth stage.

My fabricated Chariot based on Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*

Yoga was an oral tradition during the Axial Age. Eventually, Patanjali wrote what we might call an outline of Yoga for his students. Scholars disagree about when Patanjali lived. Some date it at the end of the Axial age, others date it some centuries later. The book is comprised of four chapters with196 short (usually sentence length) adages or *sutras.* The Sanskrit word *sutra*

means thread because the entire manuscript weaves together short threads until something much larger and more majestic is created or woven together.

As one might expect, there is considerable overlap between the *Upanishads* and the *Yoga Sutras*. But the *Yoga Sutras* add information which helps elucidate the role of the passenger of the Chariot. The passenger in the Chariot is the True Self and is merely the witness or the observer in the Chariot. The passenger observes the charioteer, the horses, and the surrounding environment.

Picture generated by ChatGPT based on my instructions. Everything in this image is part of the vehicle except the passenger who is the true self.

Although there is no mention of a chariot in the *Yoga Sutras*, the picture above is my fabricated image of what a Yogic Chariot might look like. It isn't really different from the Vedantic chariot. It just places more emphasis on the passenger. The passenger doesn't direct the charioteer. The passenger notices what is going on in the chariot, even what is going on inside the charioteer's head. The passenger is, so to speak, the audience. An audience member watches the movie, observes how the various characters think and feel and act. The audience member also witnesses the various scenes and circumstances of the movie. Most passengers riding in the Yogic Chariot mistakenly identify with the charioteer, reins, and horses. The *Yoga Sutras* make clear that that identification is due to ignorance. Yoga Sutras II 3-5 identify ignorance (*avidya*) as the root of suffering. The opening of *The Yoga Sutras* states the ultimate goal of yoga is the calming of the mind thereby destroying the ignorance.

> I.1 This is the beginning of instruction in yoga.
> I.2 Yoga is the calming or stilling or setting aside of the modifications, fluctuations, or thought-waves of mind. [*Yogas citta-vritti-nirodhah*]

I.3 Then the Seer (the True Self) abides in its own essential and fundamental nature.
1.4 At other times (when the person is not in the state of yoga), the person remains identified with the modifications or fluctuations of the mind.

	
Yoga Sutras 1.4 generated by ChatGPT based on my instructions. This is a moving chariot that represents most of us most of the time as we identify with our racing minds.	*Yoga Sutras* I.3 generated by Chat GPT based on my instructions. This is the realized Yogi who has achieved stillness.

Yoga instructor Erich Schiffman characterizes Yoga in the following way: "Yoga is a way of moving into stillness in order to experience the truth of who you are." The Sanskrit word *yoga* literally means yoke, like yoking an ox. In this context, it represents the yoking or union with our True Self. This union is achieved through *nirodhah*, the calming or stilling of the *chtta-vritti* (the mind stuff, the agitations of the mind, the fluctuations of the mind). This mind stuff includes thoughts, passions, emotions, desires, ideas, attitudes, etc. When, as Schiffman says, we move into stillness or quiet those fluctuations, we experience who we really are.

Sutra I.3 points out that when we (the Seer, or True Self) achieve this stillness, we then abide in our own essential nature. "Seer" is an acceptable but misleading translation. The Sanskrit word is "*drastr*" which literally means "one who sees." Our word "seer" has the connotation of a person who can "see into" or divine the future like a fortune-teller. But that is not what the original text suggests. The Sanskrit word "*drastr*" is closely related to the word "*upadrastr*" which simply means witness or one who sees that which is near. So, our true nature is that of an observer or a witness who sees what is going on around us. I would prefer "See-er" or "Observer" to Seer.

Sutra 1.4 points out how we experience the world when we are not in a state of yoga (which means most of us most of the time). At those times, we are identified with the fluctuations or

agitations or modifications of the mind. We are identified with our bodies, our social status, our anger, our desires, our quirks, our passions, our goals, etc.

Swami Savitripriya has a wonderful and beautiful commentary on sutras I.3 and I.4.

> 1.3 Learning to keep the mind silent and tranquil is the necessary prerequisite for attaining union with your True Self, for when no thoughts are arising from within the subtle Lake of the Mind, no neural firing can occur in the brain to produce brain wave patterns. Then, rather than Consciousness focusing on the wave images that appear on the surface of the Lake of the mind, consciousness remains established in and identified with it's own undiluted essence.
> 1.4 But, at all other times, when thought-waves are arising on the surface of the mind and producing neural firing in the brain, you, the Conscious-Seer within, become focused on, enmeshed in, and identified with, the wave-images, emotions and ideas that you see appearing on the surface of the mind.

In the Yogic chariot, we are merely the passenger. This is almost incomprehensible to Western ways of thinking. From Plato to the present, we think of ourselves as identified with the agitations of the mind. We are moody, or ADHD, or depressed, or excited, or intellectual, or passionate etc. We don't tend to think of ourselves as nothing more than awareness or consciousness.

In this essay, I have presented the view that the Yogic chariot can be distinguished from the Platonic chariot. In the Yogic chariot, we are merely the Observer or Witness who watches the drama unfold. The observer is capable of disidentifying or disengaging with the drama. He or she isn't sucked in by the drama. In Plato's chariot, we are participants in the drama. For Plato, I am a retired professor, a husband, a father, and grandfather. I live in Cleveland, I enjoy sports but get frustrated with the Browns. My hobbies include baking, growing vegetables, playing blackjack, and feeding birds. I'm moody and impatient. I have a temper and hold grudges. My personality, my desires, my emotions, my hopes and dreams, my memories, etc. are an essential part of my nature. That is Plato's view, and I would suggest, the Western view. But, it is not the view of *Katha Upanishad* or the *Yoga Sutras*. The Vedantic and Yogic view is that I have a front row seat in "The Jeff Show." I can witness what goes on inside his head and heart. I can observe his desires and emotions, but I can also disengage or disidentify from them.

Conclusion

Ray Grasse, a contemporary American author who writes about Yoga and astrology, suggests an analogy. Imagine you are walking down the street, and you walk past a playhouse where *Hamlet* is being rehearsed. You wander in and ask to play the part of Hamlet in the rehearsal. Your wish is granted. Grasse points out, "The essential point is that you didn't actually create this character you're portraying, Hamlet, nor were you in turn 'created' by Shakespeare. True, the character you're inhabiting up on that stage may have been conjured up by him, but not you, the actor!" It's easy, in such a situation, to identify with the role you play. Jim Carrey

famously played Andy Kaufman in *Man on the Moon*. He threw himself completely into the role. Afterwards, he said: "I realized that I could lose myself in a character. I could live in a character. It was a choice. And when I finished with that, I took a month to remember who I was... If I can put Jim Carrey aside for four months, who is Jim Carrey?" There is a famous Stanford psychology experiment in which 24 students were randomly assigned the roles of prisoner or guard. A mock prison was set up. In a short period of time, the guards began engaging in abusive behavior towards the prisoners, even though the "guards" knew this was just an experiment just as Carrey knew that he was merely an actor. The behavior was so violent that the experiment ended early. One lesson we can take away from these two examples is that humans can easily identify with the roles we are playing. The students weren't really guards, the other students weren't really prisoners, Carrey isn't really Andy Kaufman, and Grasse's amateur actor wasn't really Hamlet. It is this kind of reasoning that leads Vedantic and Yogic sages to think that in this cosmic drama or cosmic experiment, we each play a role, but we are not the role we play and should be leery of identifying with such roles. Ram Dass suggests we can play Monopoly with enthusiasm without identifying with the top hat or the iron (perhaps a clever but weak analogy).

Plato was a philosopher. He believed that rational conversation and rational thought were the pathway to human excellence and human wisdom. Rational and clear thinking was required to guide and direct our troublesome and often hazardous feelings, emotions, and desires. So, for Plato, we are at our best, we achieve excellence or *arete* when we act in accordance with reason. The authors of the *Upanishads* were not Western philosophers, but mystics. They treasured the quiet and silence sometimes experienced in meditation. This experience of "the peace that goeth before all understanding" was held to be so blissful and serene that those who experienced it wanted to free themselves from all the agitations of the mind. This blissful experience was held to be so profound and precious, that they identified it with their true nature. As Ray Grasse points out in his discussion about the amateur actor playing Hamlet that "the chief downside being that of identifying too closely with the character you're playing, to the point of even becoming 'trapped' by it and believing that's all there is to who you are."

Bibliography

Armstrong, Karen. 2006. *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions.* New York: Alfred Knopf random House.

Beatles, The. 1969. *Across the Universe.* Comp. John Lennon.

Beatles, The. 1967. *Within You Without Yog.* Comp. George Harrison.

Dass, Ram. 1978. *Be Here Now.* Kingsport Tennessee: Kingsport Press Hanuman Foundation.

Eagles, The. 1977. *Hotel California.* Comp. Don Henley, Glenn Fry Don Felder.

Easwaran, Eknath. 1987. *Dialogue with Death: The Spiritual Psychology of the Katha Upanishad.* Petaluma, California: Nilgiri Press.

Feuerstein, Georg. 1979. *Yoga-Sutra of Patanjali.* Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions.

Girls, Indigo. 1989. *Closer to Fine.* Comp. Emily Saliers.

Grasse, Ray. 2024. *In the Company of Gods: Further Dialogues with an Unconventional Mystic.* Inner Eye Publications.

Harrison, George. 1970. *My Sweet Lord.* Comp. George Harrison.

Harum, Procol. 1969. *Pilgrim's Progress.* Comp. Keith Reid and Matthew Fisher.

Jaspers, Karl. 2021. *The Origin and Goal of History.* Philadelphia: Routledge.

Plato. 1968. *Gorgias.* Princeton: Prineton University Press.

—. 1969. *Phaedrus.* Princeton: Princeton Univesity Press.

—. 1969. *Republic.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Savitripriya, Swami. 1991. *Psychology of Mystical Awakening: Patanjali Yoga Sutras1991.* Sunnyvale: New Life Books.

Schiffmann, Erich. 1996. *Yoga: The Spirit and Practice of Moving into Stillness.* New York: Pocket Books.

About the Author

Jeffrey Gold is an emeritus professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at East Tennessee State University where he taught for 42 years. He also served as Department Chair and Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. He published articles on Plato, Yoga, Jewish Mysticism, teaching philosophy, and Zen Buddhism in journals including *Philosophy East and West, International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society, Esoteric Quarterly, Philosophical Review, Teaching Philosophy,* and *The Review of Metaphysics.*