

A Razor's Edge: For an Explanation on 'Identity' In Timaeus

Ya Du, Renmin University of China, China

The Asian Conference on Ethics, Religion & Philosophy 2017
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In Katha-Upanishad, a razor's edge was compared to an extremely sharp path to manifest 'atman', the ultimate eternal Being permeating over the universe and inner Self of individuals. It discloses the arduousness of self-knowing, also reveals that an approach to one's identification with the atman lies on a seemingly impassable point. Nevertheless, difficulties could be owed to the relation between oneself and the Time. Instead of leaning to the separation of past, present and future or indulging in restless flux of material, the 'edge' implies a de-antagonistic situation where any presupposed divisions are not dissolved but involved in, meanwhile, people can struggle to recognize and reside in soul oneness among and over entire diverse appearances. This paper intends to explain how 'a razor's edge' in Katha-Upanishad inspires an understanding of 'identity' in Timaeus. In Timaeus, the unchanging self-sufficient Being is original, Time and celestial bodies in regular motions are images of Being. Identity, which maintains at a permanent present, accomplishes itself by incorporating a timeless essence and images within temporality. Thus, for human beings whose nature is a concealment of the eternity of Being or the universal soul, the way of achieving at one's identity, of nourishing oneself in accord with the universal order, appears to be passing over the 'edge', that entails an imitation of divinity and an internal whole residence at the permanent present.

Keywords: a razor's edge; Katha-Upanishad; identity; Timaeus.

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Upanishads, from which the spirit of Philosophy and Hinduism of India stems, contains a variety of philosophical ideas. One of the primary themes that Upanishads illuminates is the origin of the universe, or the ultimate substance of being, this issue also could be found in Katha Upanishad. Katha begins with a dialogue about the enigma of death, and turns into a discussion about “truth”, it suggests a way that is possible for people to be aware of the truth through atman. However, reaching the atman seems to be a difficult process, “The saint said, pursuing the highest and the truest light is on a narrow and arduous way which is full of danger, just as a razor’s edge”¹. Going through the razor’s edge becomes a metaphor accounting for the hardness of realizing the atman for people.

How the metaphor of a razor’s edge in Katha Upanishad could be instructive for catching the meaning of ‘identity’ in Plato’s Timaeus? A few questions might be related to this topic. The first is what does the razor’s edge mean in Katha Upanishad? Next is concerned about identity in Timaeus, and the last one may focus on how it is possible to construct a sort of correlation between the metaphor of razor’s edge and the issue of identity. Concerned with these questions, this article will try to explain the possibility of such an interrelationship between the metaphor and the issue of ‘identity’ in Timaeus.

A razor’s edge

According to Katha Upanishad, atman is not only the ultimate reason of the universe, but also is a wise and immortal inner self, or the soul of individuals. As it is said in Katha, atman is oneness, that means atman of the universe is identical with the atman in human, the realization of atman entails a way of seeking for truth, which is to be conscious of the identification of atman. Atman exists without birth or death, without displaying or disappearance, it is prior to and superior over any else, it is permanent and transcend over the past and the future, so it is immortal and timeless and it is separated and independent from the “body” that is mortal undoubtedly. Atman conceals itself all of the world, it could be tiny without any separable parts, at the same time, it also could be great with unmeasured vastness to involve the cosmos. People who can recognize the atman hidden in the universe as well as in their own and perform with it will rescue themselves from unhappiness and misery, in order to obtain spiritual liberation.² That means, a person whoever has realized atman and made oneself identical with the atman will be immortal. How to know and to seize atman? Neither general knowledge nor intelligences will be able to help people to realize atman, the only way to achieve at atman lies in the depth of heart, which depends on a process of self-knowing which equals to a kind of identification of one and one’s true inner self, as well as an identification of human being and Brahma who serves as the creator of universe, that could be translated by an identification of one’s soul with the atman of the universe, or the order created by Brahma.

It is a fact that Katha Upanishad insisted a dichotomy between experimental world and spiritual world, between temporal flux and eternal essence, accordingly, there exists two kinds of pleasures attracting one’s atman, one is rooted in the cheerfulness of spiritual world, another comes from senses and sensibilities. It is said in Katha

¹ Katha Upanishad, Translated by Pingshi, Buddhist Culture, China, 2003, Vol.4, p.26

² Ibid, pp.25-28

Upanishad that people who indulge themselves in sensible pleasures of exterior world, are those who just believe in one life without afterlife and live from death to death, so they exclude themselves from atman. Nevertheless, Atman, as eternal and unchanging inner self, has no beginning or end, cannot be known from sounds, views, smells, tastes of phenomenon world, or cannot be reflected, since atman transcends over all the presences in visible world and surpasses the reason, it is the movement of self controlling in interior self arrives at atman. So In Katha-Upanishad, a razor's edge was compared to an extremely sharp path to manifest atman, the ultimate eternal Being permeating over the universe and inner Self of individuals.

A process of knowing atman is a narrow and arduous way, like passing the razor's edge, which is sharp and dangerous. The razor's edge discloses the arduousness of self-knowing, also reveals that the approach to one's identification with the atman lies on a seemingly impassable point, since it is hardly for people to find a standpoint over the edge, even to go through it. In details, the difficulty firstly starts from oneself. For an individual, The Atman, the inner self seems to occupy the highest place. We could find a hierarchy in spiritual sphere, which presents a lowest level from senses to will, reason, atman of a person, and its apex is atman of the universe. Concerning about the relationship, Katha provides a metaphor of chariot, which has been interpreted later by Plato in Phaedrus and generally known by us. In Katha, Atman serves as the commander of the chariot, whereas the body is just the chariot. The reason act as a driver, senses as a horse, will as the rein of the horse, and a road as the condition of human desires. In a word, Atman plays itself as the soul's dominator, but it shows itself in an opaque way, that's to say, it often transforms itself according to materials in visible world, it deforms its oneness to multiple phenomena. Upon the multiplicity, only people who is able to look into one's inner self, and take care of one's soul, would get at the atman and go towards eternal happiness. Whoever extricates oneself from the fetter of one's body, one will realize the atman in order to be immortal.

Essentially speaking, difficulties as passing the razor's edge could be owed to a relation between human being and Time, which signifies how does our self-knowing proceed during the passing of time. As people are caught in temporal flux, forced by passions and desires, they have lost themselves always as an "exterior self", who is not able to bear one's authenticity. However, In Atman, there is no splitting of past, present and future, no separation of time, all is in one, the atman is oneness itself. Instead of leaning to the separation of past, present and future or indulging in restless flux of materials, the 'edge' implies a de-antagonistic situation where any presupposed divisions are not dissolved but involved in, meanwhile, people can struggle to recognize and reside in soul oneness among and over entire diverse appearances. In other words, going through the razor's edge is sticking to a spontaneous consciousness of one's being in all "present", when the soul has a sole sentiment about existence, without keeping nostalgias in past or projecting in future which is not yet to come, without superficial desires for more stuffs that are sufficient to decrease people to be a tyrant of themselves, to live always outside of themselves and to be alienated self. If it is possible, such a state in which people enjoy a sort of self-sufficient in each present moment, could be called wholeness and oneness in the soul. It looks like "collect yourself" mentioned by Montaigne, who believed that knowing oneself implies a great of pleasure of living in oneself properly, our barbarous illness rests on getting rid of our being, and the true inner self according to the divine and natural order. But the difference lies in that, for Montaigne, the goal of

knowing oneself is just prepared for secular life, for nature, rather than for being identified with highest atman in terms of religious belief, whereas, in Katha Upanishad, the way of arriving at the atman entails inherently an individual inner experience of religious self-resolving, that is also a philosophical self-knowing with hardness and obstructions.

Identity in Timaeus

As the same as Katha Upanishad, Timaeus presents a dialogue where Plato explores into the universe's beginning and the attributes of our world. A sensible sphere and an intelligible sphere juxtaposed there, respectively refers to opinions and eidos, images and idea, a changing and transient world and a permanent and true world, the multiple and the one, the becoming and the being. The creator makes an animate and self-sufficient perfect being, the universe, whose movement is self-motivated at a given place, and an invisible soul has been settled in it working as a master. But as we known, it is admitted by researchers and readers that Timaeus is one of Plato's most intriguing dialogues with artfully strangeness, and that under the appearance of his discourse on cosmology, there are lots of insightful scenes to be seen. As Kalkavage pointed out that "In the Timaeus not merely a repository of Greek science but an occasion for their own thinking about the power of myth, the nature of the soul, history and politics, wholeness and the love of beauty, the human fascination with origins, the will to order, and the prospects of physical science for giving an adequate account of the world and man's place in the world"³, the issue of 'identity' is not only refers to a description of the perfect idea or eidos of the cosmos as a permanent and self-identical Being that just could be known by intellectual power, by reason, but also is concerned about the soul, the order of interior self of individuals who are living in the world.

According to the nature of this eternal being, reason and harmonious order are incorporated into its soul, and the soul permeates into sameness, differences and being, three parts of which will be divided in proportion and then constitutes each sensible things, that are just copies of that original eternal being. Further more, for this great being, its eternality discloses that it is timeless, only "the present" describes what the being is, because the being is inherently equipped with an permanent identity, so it is not necessary to be proved its persistence during the elapse of time. Whereas, "past" and "future" are only related to sensible things in what Plato called as a becoming sphere. That means, since the unchanging self-sufficient Being is original, time is workable for becoming, Time and celestial bodies in regular motions are dynamic images of Being. Identity, which maintains at a permanent present, accomplishes itself by incorporating a timeless essence and images within temporality.⁴ In Sophist, identity is "that which is in its being" suffusing all that is motionless and in a state of motion. The spacing of time stems from the becoming world forms as the images of the original, and the wholeness of present also has been divided to past, present and future.

³ Peter Kalkavage, Preface of Plato's Timaeus, Focus Publishing, 2001, p.x

⁴ Plato, Timaeus, translated by Peter Kalkavage, Focus Publishing, 2001, 37E-38A, pp.66-67

After the universe has been created with time and celestial body as its images, the creator initiated to construct gods and human beings. In human, the soul will partake the soul of universe with decreased purity, but has been informed with the essence of universe as well as the knowledge about the order of universe, meantime, individuals' body which is produced by gods will be mortal. Order is embodied within the universe, but also acts as the aim of soul's movement of individuals. In each person, the soul could exist in different ways, the sacred form is arranged to be closed to our brain and is imbued with vigor, courage and rationality, while the secular and mortal form which is inclined to be filled with desires, passions, fears and sufferings seems to be set below the head, however, in human nature, there is a kind of harmony, that would help to instruct irrationality to go back to the order. In short, order regulates the motion of the universe and everyone's soul all the time.

People noticed an obvious contrast about the relationship between the body and the soul in *Timaeus* and Plato's other dialogue like *Phaedo*, where the body is depreciated as an irrational object and will be kept away from the soul's seeking to be itself, *Timaeus* presented an impression that the body, the soul and their interaction had contributed to an antagonism of rationality and irrationality, that implies a process of self-knowing. "Our rationality is not exhibited simply in rational contemplation in disregard of the influence of the body, but in the pursuit of a composite life of soul and body. Caring for the self extends to caring for the entire tripartite soul, not just the intellect, also involves caring for the body"⁵, in other words, the soul at least has to deal with both exterior and interior conditions of itself, with body and with the three parts of itself, and order is the modest admeasurement.

Penetrating through the surface of self-knowing

For human beings whose nature is a concealment of the eternity of Being or the universal soul, the way of achieving at one's identity appears to nourish oneself in accord with the universal order. Although human being partakes the reduced simplicity of the soul of great being and is engraved in mind an inscription about the perfect order of the universe, we still exist in a fleeting life without escaping from all ephemeral things, if we ask ourselves "what am I", there might be a variety of answers, "I am a thinking thing" for Descartes seems to be obstructed for people who are seeking for the identity in a real life, rather than in a pure rational sphere. For Plato, just as what he has illustrated in the *Republic*, justice finally lies in the order of one's soul which should comply with the order of the universe, the true being, or the identity of individuals perhaps fail to avoid the change and transience in sensible world, but the order is always given as an orientation, and as an self-enlightenment. Thus, identity looks like more a processing rather than a closed object, it is not transparent, but needs us to penetrate through the surface of living, and to explore in a way of self-knowing. In this sense, it appears to be passing over the 'edge', that entails an imitation of divinity and an internal whole residence at the permanent present.

In *Katha Upanishad*, seeking for atman interprets the accomplishment of identity in a religious sense, and the process seems like going through the razor's edge,

⁵ Thomas Kjeller Johansen, *Plato's natural philosophy, a study of the Timaeus-Critias*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p.155

transcending over the passage of time, and the goal of seeking finally lies at the wholeness and oneness of the soul, which depends on one's serious self-knowing in a changing world. It might be found in Timaeus that the realization of identity does not rely on one kind of religion, but its essence seems to be a motion of self-knowing as well, in which the soul of individuals should be maintain itself in the exterior and material sphere, with pursuing its self purification in the right present, rather than fleeing from the body. Seem from this dimension, it is possible to construct a corresponding understanding between the implication of a razor's edge in Katha Upanishad and 'Identity' In Timaeus.

Reference

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