



Personal Emancipation Through a Comparative of Two Metaphysical Encounters

The Samaritan Woman in the New Testament, and Nachikethas in the Katha Upanishad

Anil D'Souza, Christ Deemed-To-Be-University, Bangalore, India

Abstract

This short essay deconstructs the idea of personal emancipation through two spiritual encounters. The first is a critical incident from the Gospel of John when the Samaritan woman encounters Jesus. The second encounter from the Katha Upanishad involves Nachikethas, the young boy who is offered to the God of Death by his father as part of his sacrificial ritual. Both themes make for a formidable argument on the quest for human redemption through the pursuit of truth and the quest for salvation. The essay integrates these two encounters with elements from eastern and western philosophical perspectives in examining individual motivation in seeking for a way out of bondage from eternal suffering.

Keywords: Salvation, Emancipation, Liberty, Suffering, Oppression, Life and Death

An Essay

Amongst all the literature that makes up the narrative of Jesus, the story of a Samaritan woman, who encounters Jesus as he sits by the side of a well waiting for someone to offer him water to drink (John 4:7–42), makes for a formidable argument on the quest for human redemption through the pursuit of truth.

The story appears as a seemingly simple conversation. Jesus is thirsty. He is in a city in Samaria, at the traditional well of Jacob, from where the Samaritans living nearby draw their water. That the Samaritans and the Jews did not really get along would be an understatement. To the Jews, the Samaritans were half-breeds, worse than the Gentiles (Naseri 2014). Social prejudices predictably determined how these communities engaged with each other through social isolators immanent in their interpretations of the religious values and customs of the out-group. Each group had its version of paradise, the Elysian fields of personal salvation (Desmond 2003). Some recent evidence from the neurosciences appear to validate the psychological finding that prejudices happen outside conscious thinking where they subsequently get rooted and become immanent in behavior (Amodio 2014). As a result, there is less empathy demonstrated towards those whom we assign to an out-group (Bernstein 2016) and where this becomes the source of realized potential for conflict.

Our Contrarian emerges in this sectarian world where an absence of empathy was a determining factor, and who by many standards was witnessed as a rebellious individual. His parched throat lays down grounds for a conversation, which as it progresses, takes a philosophical turn, as do most conversations with Jesus. Sheen's (2009) narration of the events, takes us through the woman's initially casual inquiry of the stranger as she walks up to him. With each philosophical response that she receives, her demeanor turns more and more reverent. Her initial casual approach changes to one where she begins respectfully to address him as "Sir." From there on, she perceives that perhaps she is in the presence of a prophet. As the conversation proceeds further, this strange man fascinatingly narrates back to her, her history without any disclosure from herself.

Now, she is the one asking for water, from him who had said he was thirsty. But this is a different kind of water that Jesus speaks of. One that will perhaps quench her thirst forever. So now, he is not just a prophet, but perhaps the messiah.

The woman recognizes the social boundaries between the more privileged Jews and her own community. To step across this divide and share resources between these two communities was not common. As was it uncommon for a Jewish male to engage in a conversation with a solitary woman. A request for water from a member of the upper class who were custodians of spiritual salvation (Sheen 2009) and who despised her people, was an irregular one. Who then, was this man and how did a common-place conversation at the side of a well take on messianic proportions?

From latent beginnings, the narrative develops into creating a sense of wonder in the Samaritan woman who asks herself, what if this is more than just a man who has inspired awe in her, with the idea of immortality through his promise of living water. In order to know more and reassure herself that hers is not a mistaken idea, she hurries back to call her kinfolk to see for themselves who she has encountered. Going back to her village, she speaks to her kinsfolk of her encounter. From here, we have her brethren coming out to meet this man who said he comes from God and, is perhaps a God himself.

Sheen's (2009) interpretation of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman provides an insight into the design of Jesus's leadership portrait. This design, immanent in the character of Jesus, tends to emerge from innocuous beginnings into each narrative and culminate into one of unequivocal authority for spiritual and social

transformation. For the Samaritan woman, her journey from her initial inquiry into Jesus's request for water, to an epiphanic awareness that she may be in the presence of someone more than human, fills her with wonder. Here is the creation of an emotionally compelling experience (Liedtka 2017) for the woman, in her brief exchange with Jesus.

Sheen concludes the chapter by saying that those who believe that they "know" are usually far away from the truth. But those who are suffering are blessed with the humility needed to receive the gift of wisdom and grace. Lao Tzu, the Chinese stoic, says something similar in his *Tao Te Ching*, the classic Chinese text written around 400 BCE. "Those who know, don't speak. And those who speak, don't know" (Tzu 1988). To seek the way to salvation is to allow the rationale mind to take a pause and blunt its logical reasoning. We must soften our inner glare by turning our lens to blur its sharp focus. We must blunt the pride we take in being sharp and clear-cut. This is the way of the Way (Tzu 1988).

In the *Katha Upanishad*, Nachiketas seeks meta-answers, not being satisfied with the mundane and transitory. Like the Samaritan woman who waits for the messiah who will "proclaim all things" (John 4:25), so does Nachiketas seek the "answer to all things."

It starts with Vahasrava, father to Nachiketas, making a sacrifice to the heavens. As part of the sacrifice, Vahasrava is offering his cattle to the gods. However, Nachiketas observes that the cattle being offered are way past their prime. None of the fat or milch ones. This does not make a truthful sacrifice, the boy concludes. After all, a sacrifice must involve some pain of losing something that is of value to the giver. So, the precocious 12-year-old confronts his father and asks him rather provocatively "whom will you be giving me off to?"

Vahasrava initially ignores this disconcerting question, and when the boy persists, he irritably makes an impatient answer, "I will give you to Death." Not much grace or compassion evidenced from someone who is in the midst of a sacrificial prayer, but then, when one is getting rid of unwanted possessions in the guise of homage to the heavens, this kind of irritation may not have surprised his son or the reader. So, the boy obediently marches off to the abode of Death. Perhaps too obediently, or perhaps just to spite the old charlatan who "gave" him away.

Death arrives at his abode, seated on his magnificent buffalo. Realizing that the boy has been waiting for days without being received with any hospitality contrary to custom, an apologetic Death grants him three boons, one for each day that he had to wait for Death to receive him. The first boon absolves his father from his selfish behavior. The second boon is about a ritualistic practice, perhaps an addition to the narrative by a devotee of rituals and practices. It is the third one which has metaphysical rumblings, and which confounds even Death. Now Yama, the God of Death is also the God of Justice or Dharma, fairly so given the symbiotic relationship between mortality and the day of judgement.

"Grant me the knowledge of what comes after death," asks Nachiketas. Yama attempts to dissuade the boy from such a meta question. He is offered great material pleasures, but in vain. Little Nachiketas persists. And Yama finally gives in, disclosing the secrets that even the gods did not understand in their entirety. Nachiketas cleverly knows how to get what he wanted, even from a terrifying god that one would want to avoid till the last breath (literally).

The search for the meaning of death, leads to an inquiry into the meaning of life. To assess the value of life and how one may best die is a fundamental question to a philosophical mind, since, finding a reason for living is the same as finding a reason for dying (Camus 2021).

Hamlet grapples with this dilemma in his subliminal soliloquy, whether to be or not to be. Is it worthwhile to bear the whips and scorns of time or to make a voluntary death, is a consummation with which Hamlet struggles. For Hamlet, finding meaning in action is crucial to emancipate him from any guilt for choosing a course of action that may not be morally sound and hence untruthful. Ergo, he does not act and is always acted upon. His prevarication and being continuously bewildered by what constitutes truth in action leads to a tragic end for himself and his family.

In his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus is exhorting her to contemplate on the deeply existential questions and to act outside of a learned helplessness (Peterson et al. 1995). “Who am I?” and “what constitutes the good life” (Waterman 1990) form the foundational elements when seeking the good life. But is our definition of what is “good” founded on personal illusions, and therefore purely opinions derived from our biases and prejudices? (Rosen 2003). In which case, everything is permissible as Nietzsche would observe (Miller 1981). Or is the “good life” embedded in an eternal truth that is immanent in the character of one such as Christ? (Sheen 2009).

Lao Tzu in the Tao Te Ching reduces the “good life” to stoic principles of servitude (Windon 2023). Hence, she who is lowest in the kingdom is worthy of being its ruler (Tzu 1988). A parallel is drawn by Jesus in the Samaritan woman’s frank acceptance of the disorder in her life. In her acceptance of her situation, she recognizes that which is twisted and broken in her character. Here, she becomes Lao Tzu’s (1988) muse when he exhorts the reader to let herself be twisted and broken first to become straight and whole. The analogy references an identification of our debased tendencies and moves us towards a reconciliation with the “greater good” (Clark 1993). Jesus asserts the same when he urges for a recognition of individual infiniteness (greatest amongst us) through the acceptance of our incompleteness (least amongst us) (Luke 9:46). However, Jesus extends the proposition by volunteering to lead the agenda to restore individual divinities (Luke 17:20–21) by untying the knots which fetter humanity to a slavish existence. Existence, for Christ is timeless, and it therefore becomes critical that the seeker provokes consciousness to reexamine her operating values and revert to her divine nature. In this journey, he asks that he be allowed to offer his servitude and become what the Tao refers to as “our embracing light” (Tzu 1988), a light that extinguishes the darkness of disorder (John 8:12).

A compassionate embracing of disorder is an essential requirement for order to be restored. Therefore, servitude requires the leader to present himself to those who would need to develop a roadmap that dissolves disorder into order (Luke 5:32). Lao Tzu reflects this principle in calling for the good person to serve as a bad person’s teacher (Tzu 1988). There is raw material here, and therefore, here is where a good leader must be.

This brings us to the question of good versus evil polarities that confound the human condition, and which has been subjected to the torment of many a philosopher (Desmond 2003). The question of evil is one that is absent in the natural order of the universe since nature by itself does not subscribe to such categories. For Immanuel Kant, the world is a continuous

happening, which posits no value-based permissiveness or intolerance (Rosen 2003). The emergence of the human condition creates an opportunity for designing a meaningful premise for coherent individual action. In the ascription of will to meaning (Frankl 2004), the “good” is a univocal apex entity to which foundational values can be attributed for achieving a state of *eudaimonia*, commonly translated as a state of happiness (Waterman 1990). Through these attributions, “evil” in which a deficit of good is evident, can be identified for elimination. Such was the nature of the “living water” that Jesus promised the Samaritan woman (John 4:10). If the “living water” was the essence of the good, the attributes of this living water were evident in the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3–10).

Hintikka (2003) in his reference to the slave-boy story in Meno, narrates the Platonic belief that all knowledge is intrinsic to the individual and through skillful questioning, can lead the individual to reveal this knowledge to himself and the world. Hence, knowing how to ask the right questions is where an interlocutor’s competence lies. Right questioning thus leads the learner to new revelations and an expansion of conscious knowledge. Plato further asserts that in facilitating a recollection of knowledge that is held by the individual for all the lives that have been lived till date, one can conclude that there is an immortal soul that is stitching all these experiences together and allowing a coherent development and manifestation of recollected knowledge as new knowledge.

In Platonic epistemology, Nachiketas’s emancipation is through asking the right questions to Yama, where knowing how to ask the right question is mediated by a recollection of the principles of competent inquiry as *a priori* truths and which are supported through right reasoning (Hintikka 2003). To the learner, this can open infinite possibilities for action. For the Samaritan woman likewise, her ontological inquiry opened her to the possibility of salvation from a life of self-inflicted oppression by inducing a contemplative inquiry into the nature of her existence and thus freeing herself from human bondage.

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