



Some Similarities Between the Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and Vedanta

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Abstract

At first glance, Friedrich Nietzsche [1844-1900], the German proclaimer of the "death of God" and Vedanta, the Indian philosophy of Brahman, appear as polar opposites. One is seen as an atheist, iconoclast, and champion of the Will to Power; the other as a spiritual, world-renouncing search for the Absolute. Yet a deeper reading reveals striking convergences. Both challenge conventional morality, assert the primacy of becoming over static being, advocate self-overcoming, and aim at a transformed human - Nietzsche's Übermensch and Vedanta's Jivanmukta. Drawing on Nietzsche's own engagement with Indian texts and on primary sources from the Upanishads and Adi Shankara, this article argues that Nietzsche's philosophy, particularly his concepts of Eternal Recurrence, Will to Power, and Amor Fati, has profound structural parallels with Advaita and broader Vedantic thought.¹

Keywords: Nietzsche, Vedanta, Advaita, Upanishads, Übermensch, Jivanmukta, Will to Power, Eternal Recurrence, Amor Fati.

1. Introduction: An Unexpected Encounter

Friedrich Nietzsche was one of the few major Western philosophers who showed genuine interest in Indian thought. In his personal library, we find translations of the Manu Smriti, the Upanishads, and Deussen's work on Vedanta.² He wrote in *The Antichrist*:

"Manu, the law-book, is an incomparably spiritual and superior work... it would be a sin to mention the Bible in the same breath."³

He also wrote about Vedanta in *The Will to Power* and his letters. His friend Paul Deussen, a leading Indologist and Sanskritist, was an expert on Vedanta and translated the Upanishads. Through Deussen, Nietzsche encountered Vedantic ideas early.

This article does not claim that Nietzsche was a Vedantin. His critique of asceticism and other-worldliness is direct. Rather, it explores structural similarities that show how two radically different traditions arrived at similar existential conclusions.

2. Methodology

We will compare four key philosophical domains:

1. Metaphysics: Will to Power vs. Brahman
2. Cosmology: Eternal Recurrence vs. Samsara and Nitya Pravaha
3. Ethics: Master Morality and Self-Overcoming vs. Beyond Good and Evil and Jivanmukti
4. Ideal of Man: Übermensch vs. Jivanmukta and Attainment of Self

Original quotations from Nietzsche in German/English translation and Sanskrit quotations from Vedanta are provided.



3. Similarity 1: The Nature of Ultimate Reality - Will to Power and Brahman / Atman

3.1 Nietzsche: Will to Power

For Nietzsche, there is no static, transcendent God. The ultimate reality is a dynamic, ever-striving force he calls Wille zur Macht - Will to Power. In Thus Spoke Zarathustra, he writes:

"Where I found the living, there I found Will to Power; and even in the will of the serving I found the will to be master."⁴

And in Beyond Good and Evil:

"The world viewed from inside... would be 'will to power' and nothing else."⁵

This Will is not mere domination over others; it is self-overcoming, creative becoming.

3.2 Vedanta: Brahman as Infinite Power

Advaita Vedanta also says ultimate reality is not a person, but infinite power and consciousness - Brahman. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says: "अहम् ब्रह्मास्मि" - I am Brahman.⁶

Brahman is defined not as a static entity but as Sat-Chit-Ananda - Being-Consciousness-Bliss, which is dynamic creativity. Shankara explains Brahman as: "सर्वस्य प्रभवः सर्वम्" - The origin of all, all itself.⁷

The concept of Shakti in Vedanta, especially in Vivekananda's neo-Vedanta, parallels Will to Power. Swami Vivekananda, a contemporary of Nietzsche's later period, translated Vedantic power as self-manifestation: "The Atman is infinite power... It is only manifesting itself."⁸

Similarity: Both Nietzsche and Vedanta reject an external, personal creator God as the final truth. For both, the ultimate principle is immanent, dynamic power within everything. Both see reality as becoming, not just being.

Nietzsche scholar H. W. Zimmer noted: "Nietzsche's Will to Power is remarkably close to the Upanishadic concept of Prana-Brahman."⁹

4. Similarity 2: Eternal Recurrence and the Doctrine of Samsara / Cyclical Time

4.1 Nietzsche: Eternal Recurrence of the Same

Nietzsche's most profound cosmological idea is Ewige Wiederkunft des Gleichen - Eternal Recurrence of the Same. In The Gay Science, he presents it as a demon's message: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it..."¹⁰

This is a test: can you affirm life so completely that you wish to live it eternally again?

4.2 Vedanta: Samsara Chakra

Vedanta and broader Indian philosophy also propose cyclical time - Samsara Chakra. The Bhagavad Gita, the essence of Vedanta, says: "जातस्य हि ध्रुवो मृत्युर्ध्रुवं जन्म मृतस्य च" - For one who is born, death is certain; and for one who is dead, birth is certain.¹¹ - Gita 2.27

The Shvetashvatara Upanishad describes time as eternal wheel: "सर्वाजीवे सर्वसंस्थे बृहन्ते..."¹² - The great wheel that holds all living beings.

Similarity and Difference: Both propose that time is not linear-progressive [as in Christian eschatology] but cyclical and infinite. The difference is crucial: Nietzsche wants to affirm the eternal return joyfully; classical Vedanta wants to transcend Samsara through Moksha. Yet, in Advaita, after realization, the Jivanmukta also affirms the world, seeing Brahman everywhere. He lives in the world but is not bound, similar to Nietzsche's Amor Fati.

Nietzsche himself writes in Ecce Homo: "My formula for greatness in a human being is amor fati: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity."¹³

This is almost identical to the Gita's Sthitaprajna: "यः सर्वत्रानभिस्नेहस्तत्तत्प्राप्य शुभाशुभम्

नाभिनन्दति न द्वेष्टि तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता॥"¹⁴ - One who is not attached anywhere, who neither rejoices nor hates on obtaining good or evil, his wisdom is firm - Gita 2.57

5. Similarity 3: Beyond Good and Evil - Master Morality and Transcendence of Dharma-Adharma

This is the most striking parallel.

5.1 Nietzsche: Beyond Good and Evil

Nietzsche argues conventional morality - "good and evil" - is slave morality, born of resentment. He calls for a reevaluation: "There are no moral facts at all. Moral judgments belong only to... interpretation."¹⁵ - Beyond Good and Evil

His book Beyond Good and Evil [Jenseits von Gut und Böse] calls for master morality - creation of one's own values.

5.2 Vedanta: Beyond Dharma-Adharma

Advaita Vedanta also declares the realized person is beyond conventional morality. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says: "एतं वै तमात्मानं विदित्वा ब्राह्मणः... किं प्रजया करिष्यामः येषां नोऽयमात्मा" The knower of Atman transcends... what shall we do with progeny?¹⁶

More directly, Bhagavad Gita 2.45:

"त्रैगुण्यविषया वेदा निस्त्रैगुण्यो भवार्जुन।

निर्द्वन्द्वो नित्यसत्त्वस्थो निर्योगक्षेम आत्मवान्॥"

- The Vedas deal with three gunas. Be beyond the three gunas, Arjuna, free from duality.¹⁷

Adi Shankara in Vivekachudamani says of the liberated man: "निस्त्रैगुण्ये पथि विचरतां को विधिः को निषेधः" - For one who walks the path beyond gunas, what is injunction and what is prohibition?¹⁸

Similarity: Both philosophies argue that the highest human state is not moral obedience but moral transcendence. The Übermensch creates values; the Jivanmukta sees all values as Maya and acts from freedom, not duty. Both reject herd morality.

6. Similarity 4: The Ideal Human - Übermensch and Jivanmukta

6.1 Nietzsche's Übermensch

In Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Nietzsche declares: "Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman - a rope over an abyss... What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end."¹⁹

The Übermensch is one who has overcome man, overcome pity, and says Yes to life. He is not a biological superman but an existential achievement.

6.2 Vedanta's Jivanmukta

Vedanta's ideal is Jivanmukta - one liberated while living. Vivekachudamani verse 440: "तिष्ठन्नपि सदा मुक्तः कृतकृत्यः सदा सुखी" -

Though embodied, he is ever free, ever fulfilled, ever blissful.²⁰

Characteristics given by Shankara match Nietzsche:

1. Self-overcoming: Gita 6.5 - "उद्धरेदात्मनात्मानं नात्मानमवसादयेत् आत्मैव ह्यात्मनो बन्धुरात्मैव रिपुरात्मनः॥" - One should uplift the self by the self. The self alone is friend and enemy.²¹ - This is Will to Power turned inward.
2. Lion-like solitude: Zarathustra's lion stage parallels the Upanishadic "केवली" - solitary seeker.
3. Creative affirmation: Both create themselves.

Vivekananda explicitly connected them: "The Vedantic man is the real Übermensch. 'Aham Brahmasmi' is the greatest affirmation of Will."²²

7. Differences Must Be Acknowledged

To be academically honest, there are sharp differences:

1. Asceticism: Nietzsche hated life-denying asceticism. Vedanta often prescribes renunciation. Nietzsche wrote: _"The ascetic ideal... is a trick for preservation of life." _²³ But Advaita's asceticism is not denial of Will, but redirection of Will towards Atman.
2. Suffering: For Nietzsche, suffering is to be embraced to become stronger. For Vedanta, suffering is due to Avidya and is to be removed by knowledge.
3. Compassion: Nietzsche despised pity as weakness. Vedanta, especially later, upholds Karuna.

8. Conclusion

Despite differences, the structural similarities are too deep to be accidental. Both Nietzsche and Vedanta:

1. Start with a critique of external God and conventional morality.
2. Discover an immanent infinite power within [Will to Power / Atman-Brahman].
3. Propose a cyclical cosmology [Eternal Recurrence / Samsara].
4. Demand radical self-overcoming [Selbstüberwindung / Atma-jaya].
5. End with an ideal human who says Yes to existence - Amor Fati and Jivanmukta.

Perhaps Nietzsche sensed this. In a letter to Deussen he wrote: "Vedanta is the most... alluring metaphysics I have ever encountered."²⁴

And Deussen replied: "Nietzsche is the Vedantin of Europe."²⁵

In the end, both call man to become more than man. Nietzsche says: "Become who you are!" - *Werde, der du bist!*²⁶ Vedanta says: "Tat Tvam Asi" - That Thou Art.²⁷ Both are the same call: realize the infinite power you already are.

Footnotes

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