



The Concept of Self in Cārvāka Philosophy: A Philosophical Study

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ABSTRACT

The nature of the self (*ātman* or *jīvātman*) has been a central issue in Indian philosophical discourse. In accordance with the *Nyāya* methodological tradition, the establishment of one's own doctrine requires a prior examination and refutation of opposing views. Among the various rival perspectives, the *Cārvāka* or *Lokāyata* school presents a distinctive materialistic interpretation of the self. Although the original texts of the *Cārvākas* are largely lost, their doctrines can be reconstructed from references found in other philosophical and scriptural traditions. This study examines the *Cārvāka* understanding of the self through several doctrines, including *Dehātma-vāda* (the body as the self), *Indriyātma-vāda* (the senses as the self), *Prāṇātma-vāda* (the vital force as the self), and *Mano 'ātma-vāda* (the mind as the self). Despite these variations, the *Cārvāka* position ultimately maintains that consciousness arises from the material body composed of the four elements and rejects the existence of any eternal, immaterial self-independent of the body.

Introduction

In the history of Indian philosophy, the nature of the self (*ātman* or *jīvātman*) has been a central subject of philosophical inquiry and debate. The *Nyāya* tradition, following its characteristic methodological approach, seeks to establish its own doctrine only after critically examining and refuting opposing views. Therefore, before presenting the *Nyāya* conception of the self, it becomes necessary to analyze the perspectives of other philosophical systems. Among these, the *Cārvāka* or *Lokāyata* school occupies a



significant position because it provides one of the most radical and materialistic interpretations of the self. Although the original texts of the *Cārvākas* are largely unavailable today, their views have been preserved through the writings of rival philosophical traditions. By examining these sources, it is possible to reconstruct the *Cārvāka* understanding of the self and its various formulations—such as the doctrines that identify the self with the body, the senses, the vital force, or the mind.

Subject -Matter

In order to expound the nature of the individual self (*jīvātman*) according to the *Nyāya* system, we must first understand the views held by other philosophical schools regarding the individual self. For, according to the *Nyāya* method, the establishment of one's own doctrine proceeds through the refutation of opposing views. Moreover, such refutation is not possible without first presenting the nature of those opposing doctrines. Now, while discussing the rival theories concerning the nature of the individual self, the doctrine that appears foremost is that of the *Cārvāka* school. This is because in *Cārvāka* philosophy, that is, in the *Lokāyata* system, the question “What is the individual self (*jīva* or *jīvātman*), and what is it not?” occupies an important place. Therefore, we shall first attempt to understand the nature of the individual self according to the *Cārvākas*.

At the outset, it should be noted that it is well known that no independent texts of the *Cārvāka* school are properly available today. However, references to this school in Buddhist scriptures, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Manusmṛti*, and other works make it easy to infer that the tradition is very ancient. Since no original texts of this school are largely extant, our knowledge of it today is derived mainly from the writings of rival schools. In other words, it is from the statements made by philosophers of other traditions in the course of refuting the *Cārvāka* or *Lokāyata* doctrine that we are able to understand the real nature and views of this ancient school.

Our principal subject of discussion at present is the self (*ātman* or *jīvātman*). Accordingly, an attempt will be made to understand the views of the *Cārvākas* on this subject.

Dehātma-vāda

In discussing the nature of the self, the *Cārvākas* often attempt to explain what the self is by citing statements from the *Upaniṣads*. For example, they may quote the *Upaniṣadic* passage:

“Then Prajāpati said: ‘That person who is seen in the eye—he indeed is the Self. He is immortal, fearless, and Brahman.’” (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.8.4)



That is, the sage Prajāpati instructed Indra, the king of the gods, and Virocana, the leader of the Asuras, concerning the nature of the Self. He said that the person who is perceived through the eye is the Self. He further declared that this Self is immortal, fearless, and Brahman.

At this point, a well-known narrative may be mentioned. An ancient story, referred to in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, relates that the sage Prajāpati, wishing for the welfare of living beings, taught the doctrine of the Self. He said that there exists a fundamental principle, the knowledge of which leads to the knowledge of everything, and by knowing which all desires are fulfilled. This principle is the Self. The Self is free from sin, free from old age, death, and sorrow; it is free from hunger and thirst; it is characterized by true desire and true resolve. This Self must be sought and known in a special way. One who realizes the Self obtains all worlds and all desirable objects.

Both the gods and the Asuras heard this teaching through tradition. They therefore thought: “We shall seek that Self, knowing which one attains all worlds and all desirable objects.” With this intention, Indra among the gods and Virocana among the Asuras approached Prajāpati and lived there for some time observing the discipline of brahmacharya. Prajāpati asked them why they had come. They replied that they had come to know that Self which is free from sin, free from old age, death, sorrow, hunger, and thirst, and which is characterized by true desire and true resolve. This, they said, was his teaching.

Thus the fundamental question that arises is: What is this Self, and what is its nature? It is around this question that disagreement arose between the gods and the Asuras. Prajāpati then reflected that such a profound doctrine of the Self should not be imparted easily to anyone. He therefore wished to test whether they were qualified to receive this knowledge and to determine who was truly fit for it.

For this reason, instead of immediately imparting the highest knowledge, he first declared that the gross body, whose reflection is seen through the eyes, is the Self. There is no self apart from the body. Its reflection can also be seen in water. Prajāpati instructed them to look at their reflections in vessels filled with water and to describe what they saw. They replied that they saw their own bodies from hair to nails. Then he instructed them to adorn themselves with ornaments and clean garments and again look into the water. They replied that they saw their bodies decorated with ornaments and clean clothing. Prajāpati then said: “That indeed is the Self—this very body of yours.”

Hearing this, Indra and Virocana departed, thinking that they had understood the Self. Prajāpati, however, smiled to himself and said that they had departed without truly understanding the nature of the Self.



Virocana, being satisfied, returned to the Asuras and declared that the body itself is the Self. By worshipping and maintaining the body, nourishing and strengthening it, all desires can be fulfilled. The gross body alone is the Self, and there is no self that survives after death. This constitutes the doctrine of the Asuras. According to them, the gross body is the Self, and no self exists apart from the body.

The doctrine that the body is the Self is called *Asuravidyā* (the knowledge of the Asuras), and this designation is based on the narrative in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. Out of reverence for this doctrine, some people adorn the bodies of the dead with food, clothing, and ornaments, believing that such acts provide for the deceased. For this reason, some thinkers have regarded the *Cārvākas* as Asuras and the *Cārvāka* system as an Asuric doctrine.

It should be noted, however, that although Prajāpati initially taught that the gross body is the Self, Indra was not satisfied with this teaching. He reflected that if the Self were identical with the body, then when the body is adorned the Self would also be adorned; if the body became blind, the Self would become blind; and if the body were destroyed, the Self would also be destroyed. He realized that this could not be the true nature of the Self and returned to Prajāpati to express his doubts. Prajāpati then acknowledged that Indra was correct and promised to instruct him further in the true doctrine of the Self. This higher teaching of the Self, elaborated throughout the *Upaniṣads*, will be presented later in the course of establishing our own conclusion.

Among the *Cārvākas*, two main tendencies may be observed. One group is extremely radical and accepts nothing beyond matter; they may be called strict materialists. The other group is comparatively moderate and shows some inclination toward spiritual ideas.

The radical *Cārvākas* maintain that the human body is produced from the combination of the four gross elements—earth, water, fire, and air. Consciousness is not found separately in any of these elements. For example, betel leaf, lime, areca nut, and catechu are not individually red, yet when mixed in proper proportion they produce a red color. Similarly, a special combination of the four elements gives rise to consciousness in the body.

Again, just as intoxicating power arises from the proper mixture of the ingredients of liquor, so consciousness arises from the combination of the four elements. The body endowed with consciousness is itself the Self. This doctrine is known as *Dehātma-vāda* (the theory that the body is the Self).

According to these *Cārvākas*, just as the diversity of the world is explained by the inherent nature (*svabhāva*) of things, so consciousness arises naturally from the particular combination of the four



elements. Since consciousness is regarded as emerging from the elements by their inherent nature, this doctrine is also called *Bhūta-caitanya-vāda* (the theory that consciousness arises from the elements).

As stated in the *Sarvadarśanasāgraha*:

“The body endowed with consciousness is the Self. There is no proof for the existence of any Self apart from the body. The *Cārvākas* accept perception alone as a valid means of knowledge and do not admit inference or other means.”

Thus, the arguments advanced by the *Cārvākas* in support of *Dehātma-vāda* are as follows: No self apart from the body is ever perceived. Wherever consciousness is observed, it is found within the body. Therefore, when the four elements separate at death, consciousness also disappears. The existence of consciousness after the destruction of the body is impossible.

Just as a flame is merely the result of the combination of wick and oil, so consciousness arises from the combination of the four elements. Similarly, the light of a lamp exists only as long as the flame exists; when the flame is extinguished, the light disappears. In the same way, consciousness exists only as long as the body exists. When the body is destroyed, consciousness disappears.

Thus consciousness is a property of the body and exists only within it. It has no existence outside the body.

When a person says, “I am fat,” “I am thin,” “I am fair,” “I am dark,” “I am healthy,” “I am sick,” “I am young,” or “I am old,” he does not distinguish the self from the body. It is true that we also say “my body,” but this is only a secondary or figurative usage. Just as Rāhu and the head of Rāhu are identical, yet we speak of “the head of Rāhu,” so also “my body” does not imply a real distinction between self and body.

If one argues from the expression “my body” that the self is different from the body, then by the same reasoning the expression “my self” would imply another self distinct from the first. This would lead to an infinite regress (*anavasthā-doṣa*), making the search for the self impossible.

Therefore, the expression “my body” does not prove that the self is distinct from the body. The body itself is the Self, and there is no proof for any self beyond the body.

Regarding the origin of things, the *Cārvākas* maintain that the visible mechanical world, the human body, the senses, life-force, and mind all arise from the material elements. They do not accept unseen forces



(*adr̥ṣṭa*), causal laws beyond perception, or an eternal intelligent God. According to them, the various forms of existence—including body, senses, mind, life, and consciousness—arise from the accidental combination of subtle particles of insentient matter.

According to the *Cārvākas*, life-force and consciousness are identical and arise from unconscious matter. There is no need to posit a separate substance beyond matter to explain mental phenomena.

It is true that consciousness is not found in the atoms of the four elements either individually or collectively. However, when these atoms are arranged in a particular structure, signs of life and consciousness appear. From this specific arrangement arises the body, and the body itself is the Self. The *Cārvākas* do not accept cosmic dissolution (*mahāpralaya*), and therefore questions about the origin of consciousness at the beginning of creation are irrelevant for them.

Although the *Cārvākas* accept perception as the only valid means of knowledge and reject inference as an independent *pramāṇa*, the more educated *Cārvākas* attempt to demonstrate the constant relation between body and consciousness through observation and repeated experience.

They argue that observation shows that consciousness depends upon the body. Wherever consciousness exists, a body is present. There is no exception to the prior existence of the body. Likewise, where there is no body, there is no consciousness. Through such agreement in presence and absence (*anvaya-vyatireka*), it becomes clear that a causal relation exists between body and consciousness.

To demonstrate the dependence of consciousness on the body, the *Cārvākas* point out that differences in mental capacity correspond to differences in the nervous system. The difference between animal and human intelligence reflects differences in the brain. Injury to particular parts of the brain results in the loss of specific mental abilities. In old age the weakening of the brain is accompanied by the decline of mental powers.

From such observations it is clear that consciousness depends on the body. When the bodily mechanism breaks down and the nervous system dissolves into its constituent elements, consciousness also disappears.

Thus the conclusion is that the visible and perceptible body itself is the Self.

Indriyātma-vāda



Previously we attempted to understand the *Cārvāka* doctrine of *Dehātma-vāda*, according to which the visible gross body composed of material elements is regarded as the whole of a person's being. According to this view, a person naturally considers the physical body to be everything—his wealth, his possession, and even dearer than his own children. By nourishing and satisfying the body, he considers himself fulfilled. When he says “I,” he refers to this body. Thus he says, “I am thin,” “I am stout,” “I am healthy,” or “I am sick.” In this way his entire life and world revolve around the body.

However, several objections were raised against the doctrine that the gross physical body is the Self. For example, it is observed that when a person dies, the body still remains intact, yet the dead body can no longer see, hear, smell, touch, speak, or taste as before. This raises the question: Who is that self which sees, hears, smells, touches, tastes, and speaks?

In attempting to answer this question, another group within the *Cārvāka* tradition rejected the view that the gross body itself is the Self and began to search for something subtler that might be called the Self. In other words, they gradually turned inward in their analysis.

According to them, people naturally think that the eye sees, the ear hears, the nose smells, the skin touches, and the tongue tastes. Therefore these senses themselves constitute the “I.” When one says “I see,” it actually means that the sense organ—the eye—sees. When one says “I hear,” it actually means that the ear hears. Similarly, seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting are all functions of the senses. Hence the senses themselves are the Self.

In this connection the *Cārvākas* cite a passage from the *Upaniṣads*:

“The vital powers went to Prajāpati, their father, and said: ‘Revered Sir, who among us is the greatest?’ He replied: ‘That one among you whose departure makes the body appear most wretched—that one is the greatest.’” (Chāndogya *Upaniṣad* 5.1.7)

This means that when the vital functions approached Prajāpati and asked who among them was the greatest, Prajāpati replied that the one whose departure causes the greatest deterioration of the body is the highest. That alone may appropriately be called the Self.

Since the impairment of the senses leads to the gradual impairment of the body, the senses must be regarded as the Self. Therefore the term “I” should be understood as referring to the senses. Thus the senses are the Self.



Moreover, expressions such as “I see” and “I hear” indicate that the agent of seeing and hearing is the Self. Since the senses perform these functions, the senses must be the Self. It is also said that bodily activity originates from the senses; therefore the senses constitute the conscious Self.

However, objections were raised against the doctrine that the senses are the Self. Even in a dead body the sense organs—the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin—are visibly present. If the senses themselves were the Self, why does the dead body not see or hear? Why do none of the senses function in a corpse?

In reply, the *Cārvākas* argue that the Self is not one but many, differing according to the senses. When the visual organ of a person is impaired, he cannot see and considers himself blind. Yet if his hearing remains intact, he does not consider himself deaf. Thus the function of one sense cannot be performed by another. Each sense performs only its own function. Therefore the various senses are individually the Self, and in another sense the Self consists of the different senses taken separately.

When the visual sense of the blind “self” ceases to function, the person cannot see. Similarly, when the auditory sense of the deaf “self” ceases to function, the person cannot hear. When all the senses cease to function, the living being dies. Thus defective senses cannot perform their functions.

Yet the question still remains: Even when the visible sense organs are present, why is a person unable to function through them?

The *Cārvākas* reply that while the *Dehātma-vādins* understood the senses merely as physical organs, the proponents of *Indriyātma-vāda* do not identify the senses merely with the physical organs. They have observed that even though the physical organs remain in a dead body, the person cannot see or hear. Therefore the senses cannot be identified simply with the bodily organs.

According to them, the senses consist in the inherent capacity of the organs—such as the eye—to connect with their respective objects such as form, sound, smell, taste, and touch. This inherent power of connection is what is properly meant by the term “sense.”

These senses are regarded as a person’s true wealth, even dearer than children. All living beings act, move, and function through the senses. Therefore the senses are the Self.

In states such as sleep or unconsciousness, although the physical organs remain present, their inherent power of connection with their objects is absent. Therefore a person cannot see or hear in such states. For this reason, sleep or unconsciousness may be regarded as a kind of partial death.



Gradually the thought of the *Cārvākas*—and of human reflection in general—became increasingly inward and subtle. It is observed that a blind person continues to live without sight, and a deaf person continues to live without hearing. Similarly, even if the senses were absent, it does not seem impossible for a child or a person to remain alive. Likewise, in sleep all the senses are inactive, yet the person still exists and refers to himself as “I” or the Self.

Therefore the senses—whether individually or collectively—cannot ultimately be the Self.

This raises the further question: If the Self remains present even in the absence of the senses, then what indeed is that Self?

Prāṇātma-vāda

In response to the previously mentioned question, those *Cārvākas* inclined toward subtler reflection held that what remains present in the absence of all the senses is *prāṇa* (the vital force). Therefore, *prāṇa* itself is the Self. Moreover, the senses depend upon *prāṇa* for both their existence and their functions. Without *prāṇa*, the “I” of a human being or any living creature ceases to exist, and such a being is called dead. On the other hand, even when the senses are absent, the presence of *prāṇa* ensures the continued existence of the “I.” Hence the senses cannot be the Self; rather, *prāṇa* itself is the Self.

It is said, for example, that just as an emperor assigns different regions to subordinate rulers and instructs them to govern their respective territories, similarly *prāṇa* assigns specific functions and objects to the senses under its control. Thus the senses are merely instruments, while the true agent and Self is *prāṇa*.

In this context, passages from the *Upaniṣads* are cited to establish the supremacy of *prāṇa*:

“*Prāṇa* is greater than hope. Just as the spokes are fastened to the hub of a wheel, so everything is fastened to *prāṇa*. *Prāṇa* acts through *prāṇa*; *prāṇa* gives to *prāṇa* and for the sake of *prāṇa*. *Prāṇa* is the father, *prāṇa* is the mother, *prāṇa* is the brother, *prāṇa* is the sister, *prāṇa* is the teacher, and *prāṇa* is the Brāhmaṇa.”

(Chāndogya *Upaniṣad* 7.15.1)

This means that *prāṇa* is superior even to hope. Just as the spokes of a wheel are fixed in its hub, all things are established in *prāṇa*. *Prāṇa* functions through *prāṇa* and sustains all life. *Prāṇa* is father, mother, brother, sister, teacher, and priest. On the basis of such scriptural statements, the *Cārvākas* argue that it is more appropriate to regard *prāṇa* rather than the senses as the Self.



However, identifying *prāṇa* with the Self does not fully satisfy human reflection. Even within the *Cārvāka* tradition doubts arose. It may be admitted that *prāṇa* represents the life-span of a person, since life depends upon *prāṇa*. But *prāṇa* is merely breath or vital air. Although breath moves in the form of inhalation and exhalation, it possesses no consciousness.

Yet we are conscious beings. Hence it is natural for us to question whether this unconscious vital air can be our whole being—our Self or “I.” Do we not possess desires, intentions, judgments, experiences, pleasures, and pains? It is we ourselves who are sometimes happy and sometimes miserable. Therefore the Self that is denoted by “I” cannot be an unconscious vital force.

Mano’ātma-vāda

If *prāṇa* is not accepted as the Self, the question naturally arises: What then is the Self?

In answer, the *Cārvākas* state that experiences such as pleasure and pain belong to the mind. Desire, intention, doubt, and cognition are also properties of the mind. When one says “I am happy” or “I am miserable,” the “I” refers to nothing other than the mind. Therefore the mind itself is the Self.

The mind is the controller and regulator of the senses. The senses operate according to the will of the mind. Without the mind the senses cannot perform their functions; without the presence of the mind they cannot grasp their objects. For the true perceiver—the master within us—is the mind. Without mental attention no object can be apprehended through the senses.

Therefore the mind is the true seer, hearer, smeller, taster, thinker, and knower. The mind is the agent, and the mind is the Self.

The *Upaniṣads* also praise the mind as superior to *prāṇa*. For example, the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* states:

“There is another inner Self, consisting of mind; by that this (vital self) is filled.”
(*Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.3.2)

This means that there exists a Self different from *prāṇa*, which resides within it. The vital force is sustained by this mental Self. Since the body and the senses operate according to the will of the mind, the mind is the Self. On the basis of such scriptural statements, the more reflective *Cārvākas* accepted the mind as the Self and developed the doctrine of *Mano’ātma-vāda*.

According to Dakshinaranjan Shastri, the author of *Cārvāka Darśana*:



“The extreme view of the crude *Cārvākas* that the body alone is the Self is not invalidated even by the moderate view of the educated *Cārvākas* that the senses are the Self.” (*Cārvāka Darśana*, Dakshinaranjan Shastri, November 2013 edition, p. 131)

Thus two kinds of *Cārvāka* doctrines may be distinguished:

1. The crude or radical *Cārvākas*, who identify the Self with the physical body and the sense organs.
2. The educated or moderate *Cārvākas*, who show some inclination toward a more inward analysis and gradually recognize the senses, *prāṇa*, and mind.

However, even these more refined *Cārvākas* did not proceed beyond the mind. They refrained from investigating a Self described by negative attributes such as ineffable, formless, intangible, soundless, tasteless, beyond *prāṇa*, beyond mind, non-material, and indefinable—a Self described as subtler than the subtle and greater than the great.

The radical *Cārvākas* accept perception alone as a valid means of knowledge and reject all other sources, including the Vedas and scriptures, as unreliable.

The moderate *Cārvākas* adopt a somewhat intermediate position and accept inference as used in common life, though they do not regard it as infallible. Like the radical *Cārvākas*, they consider perception alone to be an infallible means of knowledge. Therefore they do not accept the kind of inference required to establish a supersensible Self beyond the mind.

Thus, although there are minor differences between the two groups of *Cārvākas*, it is reasonable to conclude that according to all *Cārvākas* the body itself is the Self. The notions of senses, *prāṇa*, and mind are ultimately reducible to the body. The senses, *prāṇa*, and mind are all products of the combination of the four material elements.

Nothing exists beyond the body. A disembodied Self separate from the body is merely an unreal imagination—like a flower in the sky. This is the final conclusion of the *Cārvāka* philosophers.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it becomes evident that the *Cārvāka* philosophers consistently attempted to explain the nature of the self within a strictly materialistic framework. Beginning with the doctrine that the body itself is the self (*Dehātma-vāda*), some thinkers within the tradition gradually proposed more refined interpretations by identifying the self with the senses, the vital force (*prāṇa*), or the mind. Despite



these internal variations, all *Cārvāka* theories ultimately remain grounded in the conviction that consciousness and mental phenomena arise from the physical body composed of the four material elements. Consequently, they reject the existence of any eternal, immaterial, or disembodied self beyond the body. In this way, the *Cārvāka* school presents a distinctive materialist perspective within Indian philosophy, which later philosophical systems, including *Nyāya*, critically examine and refute in order to establish their own theories of the self.

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