

Polyphonic Relational and Transformative Epistemology in the Upanishads

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Abstract: Polyphonic relational epistemology in the Upanishads emphasizes that truth is shaped through multiple voices and perspectives, highlighting the importance of dialogue, shared reflection, and community. The term Upanishad—signifies sitting close to the teacher, quieting the mind, and dispelling ignorance through knowledge. Each Upanishad begins with a shared invocation of peace, underscoring that knowledge is relational and requires harmony and joy in learning. Drawing on relational epistemology (Gergen, Thayer-Bacon, Code) and Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, this paper argues that the Upanishads exemplify a transformative epistemological framework: truth as co-constructed, dialogical, and inclusive. Their polyphonic weaving of metaphors, prayers, and unity of Self and world resists reduction to a single perspective, offering enduring relevance for education, care practices, and pluralistic knowledge-making.

Keywords: Relational epistemology; Polyphony; Upanishads; Dialogical knowledge; Education; Inclusivity; Transformation

Introduction

In the history of Western philosophy, epistemology has long been dominated by individualistic models of knowledge. This paradigm, rooted in Enlightenment ideals, privileges independence, empirical verification, and universal principles, often overlooking the social, cultural, and relational contexts that shape human understanding. Yet such a framework, while powerful in certain

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domains, fails to account for the deeply collaborative and contextual nature of knowing.

In recent decades, relational epistemology has emerged as a significant counterpoint to these individualistic models. Three scholars have been particularly influential in developing this relational turn. Gergen's social constructionism posits that meaning is created through language and interaction rather than discovered in a pre-existing external world. Thayer-Bacon's constructivist relational epistemology emphasizes the co-creation of knowledge through community and pluralistic engagement, particularly in educational settings. Code's feminist relational epistemology highlights the situated and ecological dimensions of knowing, challenging the myth of the detached knower and insisting that all knowledge is embedded in particular contexts and power relations. Together, these thinkers have laid the groundwork for understanding knowledge as fundamentally social and relational.

Yet even within relational epistemology, there remains a risk of privileging certain voices over others, of inadvertently reinforcing hierarchies between knower and known, teacher and student, caregiver and cared-for. It is here that Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony offers a crucial extension. For Bakhtin, truth is not monologic but dialogical; it emerges from the irreducible multiplicity of voices in conversation, each retaining its own perspective without being subsumed into a singular authoritative discourse.

A polyphonic epistemology, therefore, insists that knowledge is not merely informed by relations but is the relation itself—a dynamic, ongoing dialogue among diverse voices that co-create meaning without collapsing into unity or hierarchy.

This paper argues that the Upanishads, ancient Sanskrit texts that form the philosophical culmination of the Vedic tradition, embody a polyphonic relational epistemology long before the term was articulated in modern Western scholarship. The Upanishads present knowledge as emerging through dialogue, metaphor, and the interplay of multiple perspectives. The very etymology of the word *Upanishad*—from *upa* (near), *ni* (down), and *shad* (to sit) evokes the image of a student sitting humbly before a teacher,

engaging in intimate, transformative conversation. This relational setting is not incidental but essential: the Upanishads teach that truth cannot be grasped through passive reception or abstract reasoning alone but must be realized through lived dialogue, experiential inquiry, and the harmonious interplay of teacher, student, and the broader cosmos.

Moreover, the Upanishads consistently emphasize that knowledge is transformative rather than merely informational. To know *Brahman* (ultimate reality) is not to acquire data about it but to undergo a radical shift in one's mode of being, dissolving the illusion of separateness and realizing the unity of *Ātman* (the self) and *Brahman*. This epistemology is inherently relational and ethical: it requires humility, openness, and a willingness to be changed by the very act of knowing. The Upanishadic dialogues—such as those between Nachiketa and Yama, Uddalaka and Shvetaketu, and Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi—model this process, showing how truth arises not from a single authoritative voice but from the polyphonic interplay of questioning, teaching, metaphor, and silence.

The structure of this paper proceeds as follows. First, I provide a brief overview of relational epistemology as developed by Gergen, Thayer-Bacon, and Code, establishing the theoretical foundation for understanding knowledge as social and contextual. Second, I introduce Bakhtin's concept of polyphony and argue for its extension into epistemology, showing how a polyphonic framework addresses the limitations of earlier relational models by insisting on the irreducibility and equality of multiple voices. Third, I turn to the Upanishads themselves, examining their etymological, structural, and dialogical features to demonstrate how they exemplify a polyphonic relational epistemology. Through close readings of key dialogues, I show how the Upanishads resist monologic authority and instead present truth as co-constructed through dialogue, humility, and transformation. Finally, I explore the implications of this framework for contemporary education and care practices, arguing that the Upanishadic model offers profound insights for creating inclusive, dialogical communities of learning and wellbeing.

1. *Relational Epistemology: Foundations and Key Thinkers*

The turn toward relational epistemology represents a fundamental challenge to the individualistic traditions that have dominated Western philosophy since the Enlightenment. Where classical epistemology locates knowledge within the isolated mind of the rational subject, relational epistemology insists that knowing is a social practice, shaped by interactions, language, and cultural contexts. This shift has profound implications not only for how we understand truth and justification but also for how we organize education, care, and ethical life. Three scholars have been particularly influential in developing this relational turn: Kenneth Gergen, Barbara Thayer-Bacon, and Lorraine Code. Each brings a distinctive perspective, yet all share the conviction that knowledge is fundamentally collaborative and contextual.

Kenneth Gergen's social constructionism reframes knowledge as something we create together through language and interaction rather than discover in a pre-existing reality. In *The Saturated Self*², he describes how modern life fragments identity through competing perspectives, producing multiple, shifting selves. In *Realities and Relationships*³, he extends this analysis to epistemology itself: meaning is fluid, constantly evolving through our dialogues with others. He contends that knowledge is not a mirror of external reality but a construction emerging from linguistic and social practices. Meaning is not discovered but created through dialogue and negotiation within communities. This does not imply that reality is arbitrary or that "anything goes," but rather that what counts as knowledge is always embedded in social processes and cultural traditions. Gergen's work thus challenges the positivist ideal of objective, context-free knowledge and opens space for understanding truth as something we make together rather than something we find alone.

Barbara Thayer-Bacon builds on this foundation by developing what she calls constructivist relational epistemology.

² Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (Basic Books, 1991).

³ Kenneth J. Gergen, *Realities and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction* (Harvard University Press, 1994).

Drawing on feminist and indigenous perspectives in *Relational Epistemologies*⁴, she argues that knowledge is co-created through relationships and dialogue rather than transmitted from expert to novice. *Beyond Liberal Democracy in Schools*⁵, translates these insights into practice: classrooms should foster diversity, collaborative inquiry, and non-hierarchical teaching. She argues that education should cultivate pluralism, where multiple voices are not merely tolerated but actively integrated into the process of learning. For Thayer-Bacon, knowledge is not a static product but a dynamic process, continually evolving through dialogue and mutual engagement. Her work thus provides a practical vision for how relational epistemology can reshape pedagogy, moving away from individualized competition toward collective flourishing.

Lorraine Code, a leading feminist epistemologist, extends the relational turn by emphasizing the situated and ecological nature of knowledge. In *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge*⁶, Code critiques the ideal of the detached, disembodied knower—a figure central to much of Western philosophy. She argues that all knowledge is situated, shaped by the knower's particular location in social, historical, and cultural webs of meaning. Code 'ecological thinking' challenges the myth of objectivity, showing that even scientific knowledge is produced within specific communities and power structures. Code's work thus insists that epistemology must attend to the contexts and relationships that make knowledge possible, and that ignoring these dimensions leads to distorted and incomplete understandings.

Together, Gergen, Thayer-Bacon, and Code establish a robust case for relational epistemology. They show that knowledge is not the product of isolated minds but emerges from social interactions, that it is not universal and context-free but situated and plural, and that it is not static but dynamic, evolving through

⁴ Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, *Relational "(e)pistemologies"* (Peter Lang, 2003).

⁵ Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, *Beyond Liberal Democracy in Schools: The Power of Pluralism* (Teachers College Press, 2008).

⁶ Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Cornell University Press, 1991).

dialogue and collaboration. This relational framework has profound implications for how we think about truth, authority, and learning. It invites us to move beyond the individualistic models that have dominated Western thought and to recognize that knowing is a fundamentally social and ethical practice.

Yet even as relational epistemology challenges individualism, it faces its own limitations. In particular, it can still tend to locate truth in the individual knower, albeit a knower shaped by social relations. It is here that Bakhtin's concept of polyphony offers a crucial corrective, insisting that truth itself is irreducibly dialogical and that no single voice, however relationally embedded, can claim final authority.

2. *From Relational Epistemology to Polyphonic Epistemology: The Bakhtinian Turn*

Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian literary theorist and philosopher, developed the concept of polyphony in his analysis of Dostoevsky's novels. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*⁷, Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky's narratives are distinguished by their refusal to subordinate the voices of characters to a single authoritative perspective. Unlike monologic texts, where the narrator's voice dominates and other voices serve merely to illustrate the narrator's truth, each Dostoevsky character speaks from their own irreducible perspective, and the truth of the novel emerges not from any single voice but from the dynamic interaction among them. This is what Bakhtin calls polyphony: a literary form in which "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" coexist, each retaining its own validity without being absorbed into a totalizing unity.

Bakhtin's insight offers a powerful framework for rethinking epistemology itself. It represents a fundamental shift from both individualistic and even standard relational models. Where individualism locates truth in the isolated mind and relational epistemology locates it in social processes, polyphonic epistemology insists that truth is the very conversation itself, an

⁷ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

ongoing dialogue that resists closure and refuses to privilege any single perspective as final or authoritative.

Polyphonic epistemology addresses this risk of the earlier relational models by insisting on the irreducibility and equality of voices in dialogue. It does not deny that some participants may have more expertise or experience in certain domains, but it refuses to grant any voice absolute authority over the truth. This has several crucial implications. First, it means that knowledge is inherently provisional and open-ended; it cannot be finalized because the dialogue is ongoing. Second, it means that knowing is inseparable from listening; to know is to engage with others, to attend to their voices, and to allow oneself to be changed by them. Third, it means that epistemology is also ethics; the act of knowing involves a moral commitment to honor the dignity and perspective of each participant in the dialogue.

Bakhtin emphasizes the ethical dimension of dialogue and argues that language is always oriented toward the other, that every utterance anticipates a response and exists in relation to other voices. We come to know ourselves and the world through our engagement with others, and this engagement requires us to acknowledge the otherness of the other, to resist the temptation to assimilate their voice into our own. In this sense, dialogue is an ethical practice, one that demands openness, humility, and a willingness to be transformed.

This ethical dimension becomes especially important when we consider asymmetrical relationships. In education, for example, the traditional model positions the teacher as the authoritative source of knowledge and the student as the passive recipient. In a relational model, the teacher facilitates dialogue among students, recognizing that knowledge is co-created through their interactions. Yet the teacher may still guide the discussion toward a predetermined conclusion, subtly privileging certain voices or interpretations. In a polyphonic model, by contrast, the teacher also participates as a voice in the dialogue, but without claiming final authority. The truth of the discussion does not lie in the teacher's summary or in any single student's contribution but in the dynamic interplay among all the voices, including moments of disagreement, confusion, and surprise. Similarly, in care practices, a polyphonic

approach, insists that the cared-for is also a knower, that their experience and understanding of their own wellbeing are essential to any genuine knowledge of care. The caregiver and cared-for must engage in dialogue, each bringing their own voice, and it is in this dialogue that knowledge of the other's needs and the best course of action emerges.

Another key feature of polyphonic epistemology is its resistance to finality. This openness to revision is not a weakness but a strength; it allows knowledge to evolve in response to new voices, new experiences, and new challenges. Bakhtin's concept of "unfinalizability" captures this idea. He argues that human beings are fundamentally open-ended, that we are always becoming rather than simply being, and that any attempt to fix or finalize our identity or understanding is a form of violence. The same holds for knowledge: to finalize it, to declare it complete and closed, is to shut down the dialogue and to deny the ongoing contributions of other voices.

This commitment to unfinalizability has practical implications for education, research, and care. In education, it means that learning is never complete; students do not simply acquire a body of knowledge and then move on, but continue to engage with ideas, revising and deepening their understanding over time. In research, it means that inquiry is ongoing, that even well-established theories remain open to challenge and reinterpretation. In care, it means that the needs and wellbeing of the cared-for are not fixed but evolve, requiring ongoing dialogue and responsiveness.

Finally, polyphonic epistemology invites us to rethink the relationship between knowledge and power. By insisting on the equality and irreducibility of voices, it offers a more egalitarian vision. It does not deny that power exists or that some voices have more institutional support than others, but it insists that epistemic authority cannot be claimed by any single voice. Instead, authority is distributed across the dialogue, emerging from the collective engagement of all participants.

Having established the theoretical framework of polyphonic relational epistemology, I now turn to the Upanishads to show how these ancient texts exemplify this very approach. Long before

Bakhtin articulated the concept of polyphony, the Upanishads modelled a way of knowing that is dialogical, transformative, and irreducible to monologic authority. They invite us into a conversation that spans millennia, offering wisdom that remains profoundly relevant for our contemporary challenges.

3. The Meaning of the Word Upanishad

The word *Upanishad* comprises three Sanskrit syllables—*upa* (near), *ni* (down), and *shad* (to sit). This etymology evokes a powerful image: a student sitting humbly near a teacher, in a posture of receptivity and reverence, ready to receive transformative knowledge. The act of sitting close is not merely physical proximity but signifies an existential and epistemological stance—one of quieting the mind, setting aside ego, and opening oneself to wisdom that cannot be grasped through intellectual effort alone.

The Upanishads teach that true knowledge requires this kind of humble, relational engagement. They emphasize sitting quietly before the teacher to dispel the darkness of spiritual ignorance (*avidyā*) through the light of knowledge (*vidyā*). The main contentions of the Upanishads include: to sit quietly or become quiet and calm down after having acquired truthful knowledge about reality; to calm down all agitations and dispel all confusions and doubts; to remove the darkness of ignorance by the light of knowledge; and to find a remedy for the spiritual disease or illness represented by this world that afflicts all creatures.

The Upanishads are also known as *Vedānta*, meaning the “end” or “culmination” of the Vedas, as well as their “essence” or “summarized version.” The eleven principal Upanishads, which Shankaracharya commented on directly or indirectly, underscore the unity of the Self (*Ātman*) and the ultimate reality (*Brahman*). Despite being revealed in a different era, the Upanishads' influence remains timeless and enduring. Their truths, not confined by time, continue to resonate across cultures and centuries, reaffirming their relevance in our ever-changing circumstances.

Significantly, all the Upanishads begin a shared invocation of peace (*shānti pāṭha*). In this prayer, both the teacher and the

disciples pray together to overcome the main difficulties that hinder the grasping of knowledge. The main points of the prayer include: bringing quietness, peace, and stillness into the minds of teacher and student, so that the mind can be focused easily on the knowledge; cultivating the correct attitude that both student and teacher should have to make learning effective, promoting an attitude of understanding and respect while avoiding useless debating and arguing; and promoting a vigorous intellect, so that the Truth may be reflected upon from all angles and assimilated well into the mind in its true import.

During studies, the ambience must encourage these three elements to come to the fore. The prayer emphasizes that a teacher and a student cannot exist without each other—their harmony is crucial. Both must put forth effort to grasp the knowledge. Both must look forward to the class with anticipation and joy. There must be joy in the learning process itself. The desired result is clarity of understanding, without doubt, and abiding in the knowledge. Crucially, the knowledge must be lived; this is not just an intellectual pursuit but a transformative practice.

The prayer also expresses a profound wish: “May the teacher and taught come to love each other eternally. Let it not be just a business relationship. There should be no ill will or disrespect between them.” Finally, the prayer is for a peace invocation to all living beings, extending the relational framework beyond the classroom to encompass the entire cosmos.

The Upanishads' approach to reality is multifaceted, emphasizing the interconnectedness of diverse perspectives and the relational nature of knowledge. This helps readers grasp the depth of the Upanishads' philosophical framework: truth is not monolithic but emerges through dialogue, metaphor, and the integration of multiple voices.

4. *Transformative Epistemological Framework of the Upanishads*

The Upanishads collapse the distinction between knower and known. To know *Brahman* is to realize one's identity with it: *tat tvam asi* (“Thou art That”). In other words, Upanishadic epistemology is not about knowing *about* reality but *becoming*

reality itself. It reframes knowledge as a spiritual practice in which inquiry, meditation, and ethical living converge to dissolve ignorance and reveal the unity of existence. This makes it radically different from Western epistemological traditions, which often separate knowledge from transformation.

The transformative dimensions in the Upanishads include several key movements. First, there is a shift from external authority to inner authority. Knowledge is not validated by external proof but by inner certainty and realization. This challenges Western epistemology's reliance on empirical verification. Second, there is a movement from multiplicity to non-duality (*Advaita*). Epistemology transforms perception: diversity is seen as appearances, while knowledge reveals the underlying unity of existence. Third, there is a progression from rationalism to transcendence. Rational thought is valued but transcended. The Upanishads use reason to dismantle illusion, then point beyond reason to silence (*mauna*) and meditative insight. Fourth, and most crucially, there is a transformation from information to transformation itself. Knowledge is performative—it changes the existential condition of the seeker. Epistemology is inseparable from ethics and soteriology (the study of salvation or liberation).

The Upanishads highlight *pramāṇas* (means of knowledge) such as *śruti* (scriptural testimony), *yukti* (reasoning), and *anubhava* (direct experience). Recognizing these methods can inspire readers to appreciate their role in personal growth and transformation, deepening their engagement with the practice of knowing as a lived, embodied experience.

In support of the above views, a discussion of some Upanishadic dialogues will be instructive, demonstrating how these texts model polyphonic relational epistemology in practice.

5. Dialogical Case Studies and Polyphonic Truth

Nachiketa and Yama (Katha Upanishad⁸, Chapters 1–2)

Young Nachiketa, offered to Death by his father in a moment of anger, meets Yama (the god of death) and asks three

⁸ Swami Gambhirananda, trans., *Katha Upanishad: With the Commentary of Shankaracharya* (Advaita Ashrama, 1980).

questions. The themes of the dialogue are fearlessness, the impermanence of worldly pleasures, and the path to liberation. Nachiketa's fire sacrifice and his choice of knowledge over wealth reflect the aspirant's journey toward inner truth.

This dialogue illustrates relational epistemology, in which truth is revealed through persistence, humility, and dialogue. Nachiketa's insistence on questioning Yama three times emphasizes the role of humility and open-minded inquiry in the knowledge process. His refusal to accept superficial answers demonstrates that knowledge is dialogical, requiring courage and humility. This persistence exemplifies a polyphonic relational epistemology: knowledge arises not from unilateral teaching but from dialogical struggle, culminating in transformation. Yama, despite being a deity, does not impose truth but reveals it through sustained engagement with Nachiketa's questions.

Satyakama Jabala and Śvetaketu (Chandogya Upanishad⁹, Chapters 4 and 6)

Satyakama Jabala, a young boy and seeker of truth, is accepted by his guru despite his uncertain parentage, purely on the basis of his honesty. He learns from nature itself—fire, air, and animals become his teachers. Knowledge is not confined to human teachers; nature itself becomes a polyphonic voice. Fire, wind, and animals participate in the epistemological dialogue, expanding the relational field beyond human society. This demonstrates that truth can emerge from multiple, unexpected sources, challenging any hierarchy of voices.

The dialogue between Uddalaka and Śvetaketu (*Chandogya Upanishad*¹⁰, Chapter 6) is famous because the “*Tat Tvam Asi*” teaching emerges through repeated questioning, showing relational pedagogy and transformative realization. Śvetaketu was sent by his father to study the Vedas, but he returned arrogant. His father, Rishi Uddalaka, teaches him the essence of *Brahman* through metaphors such as salt dissolved in water. The themes of the dialogues are humility, experiential learning, and the omnipresence

⁹ Swami Lokeshwarananda, trans., *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (Wisdom Library, 2019).

¹⁰ Ibid.

of *Brahman*. The repeated teaching of “*Tat Tvam Asi*” illustrates relational pedagogy. Knowledge is not a single statement but a transformative process of questioning, metaphor, and experiential realization.

*Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*¹¹, *Chapters 2 and 4*)

The dialogues between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*¹², Chapter 2, Section 4, and repeated in Chapter 4, Section 5) stand as powerful examples of relational epistemology because they occur between husband and wife as well as teacher and student, and they are profoundly transformative, leading to Maitreyi's realization about immortality and knowledge. This dialogue collapses boundaries between the personal and the philosophical, between husband and wife, and between teacher and student. It demonstrates that epistemology is inseparable from care, intimacy, and ethical relations.

Together, these dialogues show that the Upanishads are not monologues of authority but polyphonic conversations where truth is co-created. Each dialogue involves multiple voices—teacher and student, human and nature, husband and wife—and in each case, knowledge emerges not from a single authoritative pronouncement but from the dynamic interplay of questioning, teaching, metaphor, and silence.

6. Implications for Education and Care

Polyphonic relational epistemology in the Upanishads offers profound implications for contemporary practice, reshaping education, care, and ethics from the ground up. It proposes an entirely different orientation toward what knowledge is, how it is produced, and who is authorized to hold it.

In education, the most immediate implication of polyphonic relational epistemology is the transformation of the classroom from a site of transmission into a community of voices. The *shānti pāṭha*,

¹¹ Swami Madhavananda, trans., *The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: With the Commentary of Shankaracharya* (Advaita Ashrama, 1950).

¹² *Ibid.*

the shared peace invocation with which every Upanishad begins, offers a strikingly concrete model for what a transformed classroom might look like. Both teacher and student pray together, as equal voices, before knowledge is sought. Neither is presumed to already possess the truth; both are approaching it together, in a spirit of humility and mutual anticipation. This shared orientation is not merely a spiritual nicety but an epistemological precondition. Knowledge, on this account, cannot arise in an atmosphere of hierarchy, resentment, or performance anxiety. It requires what the Upanishads call *samāhita citta*, a composed and receptive mind, in both teacher and student alike.

If learning is understood not as the acquisition of fixed knowledge but as an ongoing dialogue in which students and teachers together explore questions, challenge assumptions, and construct understanding, then the architecture of the classroom must change. Seating arrangements, discussion protocols, the distribution of speaking time, the design of assessments - all of these become sites of epistemological commitment.

Assessment, too, is transformed. The standard model evaluates knowledge as individual property — what this student knows, as measured against a fixed external standard. A polyphonic model shifts attention toward collective understanding, collaborative inquiry, and the quality of engagement with other voices. This is not to abandon rigor but to redefine it: a student who can hold their own perspective while genuinely attending to and being changed by others' perspectives is demonstrating a more sophisticated epistemological capacity than one who can simply reproduce a correct answer. The Upanishadic dialogues model exactly this kind of rigor. Nachiketa does not simply accept Yama's first response; he persists, questions, and refuses superficiality. Śvetaketu must be repeatedly unsettled by his father's questions before the teaching of *tat tvam asi* can land. Knowledge, in these dialogues, is not transferred but provoked. Such provocation requires both courage and humility from all parties.

In care practices, the implications are equally transformative. The dominant model of professional care, particularly in medicalized contexts, is structured around a fundamental asymmetry: the caregiver knows, and the cared-for is

known. The patient presents symptoms; the professional diagnoses and prescribes. Even when patient-centered care is invoked as a value, it often remains instrumental. The patient's perspective is gathered as data to improve the accuracy of the professional's knowledge, rather than being recognized as a genuinely different and irreplaceable voice in the epistemic field.

In the dialogue between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi, the husband and wife are simultaneously teacher and student, caregiver and cared-for and these roles are not fixed but shift throughout the conversation. Maitreyi's questions do not merely prompt Yajnavalkya to repeat what he already knows; they draw out dimensions of the teaching that his own prior framing had left implicit. Her voice is not supplementary to his knowledge but constitutive of it. This is the Upanishadic model of care: the cared-for is not a passive recipient of care but an active participant in determining what care means and how it should be provided. Their understanding of their own wellbeing is not simply a symptom to be managed but a voice to be heard.

In medical contexts, this would mean that patients' knowledge of their own experience is treated as epistemically authoritative. In certain areas, for instance, in mental health care, the therapeutic relationship becomes a site of genuine co-inquiry rather than diagnostic assessment. In social work and community care, it means that communities must be understood as experts on their own conditions and needs, with professionals serving as facilitators of community voices rather than external saviors with predetermined solutions.

Epistemologically and ethically, knowing becomes inseparable from engagement: to know is to listen, to respect, and to be transformed by others. Truth is understood not as possession but as participation. This framework challenges us to cultivate classrooms, communities, and care practices where multiple voices are heard, respected, and woven together. It invites us to move beyond the individualistic and hierarchical models that have dominated much of modern thought and to embrace a vision of knowledge that is fundamentally relational, dialogical, and transformative.

Conclusion: Upanishads as Polyphonic Epistemology

The Upanishads, often seen as mystical texts, can be re-read as profound epistemological treatises. Their emphasis on dialogue, relationality, and transformation anticipates and enriches modern theories of relational epistemology and polyphony. In today's pluralistic and interconnected world, the Upanishads remains enduringly relevant. They challenge us to cultivate classrooms, communities, and care practices where multiple voices are heard, respected, and woven together. The Upanishads thus stand as timeless guides for a polyphonic relational epistemology—an epistemology that is dialogical, inclusive, and transformative. The Upanishads do not offer us a finalized blueprint for this transformation; they offer us, instead, an invitation to sit down — humbly, together, attentively, and begin the conversation again.

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