The Aitareya Upanisad (AU) is a short prose text in three chapters. The AU is commonly regarded as one of the oldest Upaniṣads, though younger than the Bhadāranyaka or the Chāndogya Upaniṣad.1 The AU belongs to the Aitareya school of the Rigveda.

The AU comprises the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters of the second book of the Aitareya Aranyaka. Occasionally, the first three chapters of the second book of the Aitareya Aranyaka are called an Upaniṣad as well, and given the name Bahūrea-Brāhmaṇa Upaniṣad or Mahā-Aitareya Upaniṣad. The third book of the Aitareya Aranyaka is also sometimes regarded as an Upaniṣad, called the Sanhitopaniṣad. The AU is deeply imbedded in the text of the Aitareya Aranyaka. There can be little doubt that the AU is simply a part of the Aitareya Aranyaka that has been given a separate name. The relationship between the Aitareya Aranyaka and the AU helps to illustrate how the Upaniṣadic genre came into being: The Upaniṣads were at first chapters within the Brāhmaṇas and Aranyakas, dealing with the topic of ātman. Later on, these chapters took on a literary life of their own, and developed into a new textual genre.

A few scholars have suggested that the text of the AU in its present form may be heterogeneous. Schneider suggests, on philosophical grounds, that the first adhyāya is the historical core of the text.2 Smith, who regards the AU as one of the earliest Upaniṣads, claims that the last chapter of the AU is a later interpolation, but does not state why he thinks so.3 In fact, there are reasons to assume that the first chapter of the text is older than the last two.

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1 See e.g. Deussen 1906 (1966): 24, Olivelle 1996: xxxvi.
2 Schneider 1963: 61.
3 Smith 1952: 99.
All the three chapters of this Upaniṣad explore various aspects of ātman. The first chapter contains a cosmogonic myth where ātman itself is an active creator:

In the beginning this world was just ātman alone, and no one else blinked. He thought: Let me create the worlds!

In this part of the text, ātman is a primeval mythological creator, rather than the individual essence of a human being. But is the creation described in AU 1 a primeval act of creation by one mythological being, or is this a description of the continuous creation of the external world by our individual ātmans? The text is open to both interpretations, although the first interpretation is perhaps the more likely one. The use of the phrase agra āśīt ("there was in the beginning") so characteristic of late Vedic creation stories indicates that what is described may be a primordial creative act. This portrayal of ātman as a divine being, rather than just the inner essence of a human being, is characteristic of the Upaniṣads of the Rgveda.

In the first chapter of the AU, the creator ātman is identified with the Vedic god Indra. As we have already seen, Indra plays a prominent role in the Upaniṣads, and is also elsewhere identified with the ātman. This Upaniṣads’ relationship to the Rgveda is reflected in many facets of the text. The creation story in AU 1 portrays the ātman as a divine creator, and the process of creation is compared to an egg hatching:

He incubated that man, and from the man incubated the mouth was hatched, like an egg...

This comparison between the creation of the universe and the hatching of an egg is highly reminiscent of the creation story in Rgveda 10.121.

In the second chapter of this Upaniṣad, we find a slightly different view of ātman. Here, the AU discusses the three births of the ātman. In this part of the text, ātman refers to the immortal essence of a person, rather than to a mythological figure. The first birth is conception, the second is nourishing an unborn child in the womb, and the third rebirth.

\[^1\text{AU} 1.1.\]
\[^5\text{AU} 1.13.\]