

Sankaracarya on Non-Duality

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Abstract:

This paper delves into the philosophical framework of Ācārācārya's Advaita Vedānta, a foundational school of thought that has profoundly impacted Indian philosophy and spirituality, shaping the trajectory of Hindu thought and influencing various aspects of Indian culture, from art and literature to science and ethics. By exploring the concept of non-duality, the nature of Brahman, the illusory nature of the world, and the path to liberation, this analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the non-dual reality of Brahman and its implications for human existence, offering a nuanced and multifaceted exploration of one of India's most influential philosophical traditions. Through a critical examination of Ācārācārya's commentaries on the Upaniṣads and the Brahma Sūtras, this paper reveals the complexities and depths of Advaita Vedānta, highlighting how this philosophical system challenges traditional notions of reality, knowledge, and existence. By investigating the key concepts of Advaita Vedānta, including the distinction between the individual self and the ultimate reality, and the significance of self-realization in achieving liberation, this analysis provides a rich and nuanced understanding of Ācārācārya's philosophical vision and its enduring impact on Indian thought and culture. Ultimately, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the Advaita Vedānta tradition, its significance in the history of Indian philosophy, and its continued relevance in contemporary debates about the nature of reality, consciousness, and human existence.

Keywords:

Advaita Vedanta, Brahman, Non-Duality.

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Introduction:

Advaita Vedānta, a venerable Indian philosophical tradition, has exerted a profound impact on the development of Indian philosophy and spirituality. Throughout the centuries, this tradition has profoundly influenced Indian thought, permeating diverse aspects of Indian culture, including artistic expression, literary works, scientific inquiry, and ethical frameworks. At its core, Advaita Vedānta posits the concept of non-duality, which asserts that the ultimate reality, Brahman, is a unified, indivisible, and all-encompassing consciousness. This concept challenges conventional understanding of reality, knowledge, and existence, offering a nuanced and multifaceted perspective on human experience.

Objectives: The primary aims of this paper are:

1. To provide an in-depth examination of ŚaEkarācārya's concept of non-dual reality and its significance within the Advaita Vedānta tradition.
2. To critically analyze of ŚaEkara's interpretation of Brahman as the ultimate, absolute, and indeterminate reality.
3. To explore the profound implications of ŚaEkara's philosophical ideas on our understanding of consciousness, reality, and human existence.

Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, incorporating a descriptive and analytical framework to investigate ŚaEkarācārya's notion of non-dual reality. The research methodology comprises a thorough examination of existing scholarly works on Advaita Vedānta, a critical evaluation of ŚaEkara's exposition of Brahman, and an in-depth analysis of fundamental concepts and principles, including the dichotomy between the individual self and ultimate reality.

Discussion and findings:

It would not be an exaggeration if we claim that the Vedānta of ŚaEkarācārya (788 – 820) has exerted the greatest influence on Indian life. Of all the Vedānta schools, the Advaita Vedānta is probably the best known Vedānta school. Advaita literally means *oneness* or 'not two'. This means that the Vedānta, especially as interpreted by ŚaEkara, was a monistic or non-dualistic system emphasizing *oneness*. This conception of non-dual reality is fundamental to ŚaEkara's *Reality*. ŚaEkara was the first great exponent of One Brahman. In his rationalistic interpretation of *the end portion of the Veda*, ŚaEkara claims that Brahman is the only ultimate reality. For him, "the Upanicads revealed the highest truth as Brahman."¹ Instead of dual or qualified reality in philosophy, ŚaEkara develops a unique consciousness based on his absolute reality. In ŚaEkara's view, Brahman is the ultimate reality, the non-

dual or absolute. It is the absolute consciousness that is unique. Brahman is what Śāstras calls as the only object worthy of being known. However, we can't give any precise definition of non-dual absolute because Brahman is indeterminate or *NirguḠa* and *Niravayava*, featureless as well as formless. Thus, Brahman is undefined, and inexpressible, as every determination, definition, limits the unlimited Brahman. As ŚaEkara points out "Its nature is inexpressible, for when we say anything of it we make it into a particular thing. We may speak about it, though we cannot describe it adequately ..."² Therefore, to define Brahman is to involve self-contradiction and to limit or fix the Supreme Brahman.

Now the question arises how can we describe limitless Brahman? The answer depends on ŚaEkara's claim that Brahman is the 'That' without the 'What', It is *One* without a *Second* (*EkaA eva advitīyam*). Brahman is Secondless in that it is non-dual. According to ŚaEkara the Ultimate reality is unqualified Absolute and there is no diversity. It is the immediate consciousness (*Sākci*), the Self which is Self-luminous in that all means of cognition are found in Brahman. According to Śāstra, Brahman has been characterized from two important points, viz. essential and secondary. Of these, the former (essential characteristic) consists in the very nature of a thing. Śruti states that Brahman is Truth, Knowledge and Infinite ('*SatyāA Jñānam anantaA Brahma*' '*nando Brahmoti Vyajanat*').³

To say that Brahman is *SatyāA* is to say that it is the opposite of contradiction and flux. It is beyond contradiction at any moment in time and remains the same. Brahman does not change, as it is unchanged. Thus, Brahman is the highest truth and is not contradicted. Brahman is just like 'Is', but since 'Is' is relative to 'Is-Not'. Brahman is beyond both 'Is' and 'Is-Not', as it opposed all empirical existence. Therefore, according to ŚaEkara, Brahman is *sat* or *satya*. This implies that Brahman is real truth, meaning that it is not impermanent.

For ŚaEkara, Brahman, the ultimate reality is *jñāna*. Yet, *jñāna* here does not mean ordinary human knowledge which involves the realization of knower and known, the subject-object dualism, which is *visayajñāna* and *vikalpajñāna*. The knowledge of *advaitam Brahman* is *avisayajñāna* and *avikalpajñāna*. *Brahman-jñāna* presupposes that the knowledge of Brahman is completely different from empirical experience. ŚaEkara contends that Brahman is *jñāna*, since it transcends the duality of subject and object, knower and known. Even all distinctions, and determinations end here. In his account of Brahman knowledge is not the attribute of Brahman. Here knowledge of Brahman is *Brahman itself* which may be termed as *autonomous* or *indubitable* knowledge. Brahman while transcending the *pramāḠas* does not transcend experience itself. *Anubhava* remains the goal of knowledge.⁴ That is to say, Brahman is to be the nature of direct experience.

ŚaEkara upheld the thesis that Brahman which is *anantam*. He emphasizes that Brahman is *anantam* and therefore is infinite, eternal and unlimited. In order to emphasize the limitless nature of the absolute, ŚaEkara has affirmed it is devoid of all contradiction of space, time and causation. Because, to him, Brahman is ‘*sajātīyavijātīyasvagatabhedarahitam*’, i.e. it is without anything akin to it. It is matchless as well as unqualified. He rejects the view of Brahman as both being and non-being. What he wishes to establish is that it has nothing different from it. There is no inner difference in Brahman itself. Hence, *Brahman* is simple, unique and undifferentiated. *Brahman* has no *genus*, no *species* but is itself a *genus*. ŚaEkara submits that the ultimate reality is *akhaGda*, *Ananta*, *aparicchinna* and *aparināmi*. This clearly leads to an infinite non-dual consciousness. Thus, so far we have seen, that the absolute is pure consciousness and immaterial in nature as it transcends all categories, concepts etc.

ŚaEkara however rejects the attribute (*guGa*) of Brahman. He remains a staunch supporter of *nirguGa Brahman*. However, the Upanicad explains Brahman as “*nirguGo guGi*.” It is to be noted here that *guGa* does not mean a quality or the *guGa* of SāAkhya viewpoint. It is because he felt that “when the absolute is said to be *nirguGa*, this only means that it is trans-empirical, since *guGas* are products of *prakṛti* and the Absolute is superior to it.”⁵ Thus, for Advaita of ŚaEkara, it transcends the *guGas*, yet not empty.

To Advaita Vedānta, Brahman is sometimes spoken of as *sat*, *cit* and *ānanda*. Again, in the Upanicads we find the same utterances of Brahman as *saccidānanda* Brahman, and it is regarded as independent, unconditional, self-complete and self-subsisting. ŚaEkara’s philosophy asserts that it is eternal existence, unalterable (*sat*); it is self-revealing, self-luminous and ever-effulgent, pure consciousness (*cit*) and is also unlimited as well as pure bliss (*ānanda*). But then, the question is: does we should regard these three terms as attributes of Brahman? In response of it, ŚaEkara says that these three terms *sat*, *cit* and *ānanda* are not attributes of Brahman but are intended to deny the nature of predication itself. “It is *sat* (real), meaning that it is not *asat* (unreal). It is *cit* (consciousness), meaning that it is not *acit* (unconsciousness), it is *ānanda* (bliss) meaning that it is not of the nature of pain (*duḥkhasvarūpa*).”⁶ Bliss, for ŚaEkara, is not *surpassable* bliss (surpassable happiness is a piece of happiness) but an *unsurpassable* bliss. “And unsurpassable happiness is Brahman itself, because of such Śruti texts as ‘He knew bliss to be Brahman (*Taitt.*, III, 6)’, ‘Brahman is knowledge, bliss (*Bṛh.*, III, ix, 28)’.”⁷ According to this analysis, *sat* is *Being* without *Becoming* which transcends the category of time, and *it* is what pure consciousness is. ŚaEkara attempts to justify it by saying

that “Brahman is consciousness as such and it never lapses into the self-conscious, the subconscious or the unconscious.”⁸ The consciousness and bliss aspects of Brahman have to be discovered either by the study of or inquiry into the *Śāstra*. Accordingly, it is self-luminosity of consciousness as substrate extends only to its reality-aspect. Brahman is self-luminous and shines by itself and in itself because the ultimate reality has not to be revealed by the psychosis in any way. That is why it is self-luminous. Again, Brahman is bliss itself and not blissful, since bliss is not a predicate to Brahman like pleasure, happiness and so on. In this way Brahman is *sat-cit-ānanda* or *Being-consciousness-bliss-absolute*. Thus, one can say concurrently that the Absolute is what the pure subject is without any object or any predicate as such. ŚaEkara contends that our knowledge of the Absolute is *Nirguḡa Brahman* ‘is desired is the fruit’⁹.

Moreover, the latter (secondary) characteristic of Brahman is not a feature of Brahman itself. A secondary characteristic of Brahman is that which is not originally possessed by Brahman, but simply attributed by human beings. In the *Vedāntaparibhācā*, it is pointed out that “As the possession of smell is a (secondary) characteristic of earth, for there is no smell in atoms (of the earth) at the dissolution of the universe, nor is in jars etc. at the time of their origin, with regard to the subject under discussion (Brahman). It’s being the cause of the birth etc. of the universe as such a characteristic” (*Yathā GandhaC victim prithivilakcanam, Mahapralaya Paramānucu, Utpattikale Ghatādisu sa Gandhabhāvat, Prakriti sa Jagajnmādi kāraGatvam*).¹⁰ In this sense, Brahman is regarded as the cause of the origin, maintenance and dissolution of this universe. For ŚaEkara, Brahman is “the cause from which (proceeds) the origin or subsistence and dissolution of this world ...”¹¹ With regard to the cause of the origin etc. of the universe, the *Śruti* texts say, “*Yato bā imani bhutāni yena jātāni jīvantī yat prayantyābhisainbisanti*.”¹²

The *TamasthalakcaGa* of Brahman explains Brahman with attributes. It is often known as *Saguḡa Brahman*. Explaining the definition “*Janmādyasa yatah*” (Brahma Sūtra, I.I.2), ŚaEkara says, “The cause from which produces the origin, sustentation and dissolution of the world which is extended in names and forms, which includes many agents and enjoyers, contains the fruit of actions, specially determined according to space, time and cause – a world which is formed after an arrangement inconceivable even for the mind – this Omniscient and Omnipotent cause is Brahman (i.e. *Saguḡa or Īshvara*).”¹³ Almost all the upanicads directly expressed the view that *Īshvara* is both a material cause (*upādāna-kāraGa*) and an efficient cause (*nimitta-kāraGa*) of the world.

So the point here is that there are two views regarding the ultimate reality, viz. *Higher* and *Lower*, *Parā* and *Aparā*, *Nirguḡa* and *Saguḡa* Brahman etc. One can

realize the very notion of *NirguGa Brahman* merely by *Brahmanubhava*, in which he realizes himself oneness with Brahman. No doubt who has such knowledge of Brahman, can attain the state of liberation (*moksha*) easily. Of course, at this stage he becomes Brahman itself (*Brahma-vid Brahmaiva Bhavati*). The Śruti texts say, ‘The Knower of Brahman becomes Brahman itself (*cp. MuG, III, ii, 9*)’. There is no expression in such knowledge, where the subject-object dualism merges. On the other hand, from the empirical knowledge, Brahman is *saguGa* Brahman. Due to ignorance we ascribe qualities, or when we impose attributes to Brahman, this arises the subject-object dualism between Brahman and us. Here we look at Brahman as an object of worship or God. Therefore, it is the *saguGa* Brahman, to whom we ascribe the attributes as Omnipotent, Omniscient, all-pervading, all-powerful, all-knowing etc. The concept of *saguGa* Brahman, thus, manifested in religion. From the religious point of view we describe the Absolute as God. And there arises a vast gap between God and us. This is what the result of *avidyā* or nescience, the germinal power.

The above notion, however, is not acceptable to ŚaEkara. Both determinate (*saguGa*) and indeterminate (*nirguGa*) cannot be ascribed to Brahman at a time, for a reality that has two sides or can be experienced in two ways cannot be the highest or supreme reality. When we view Brahman from the outside, then we have *saguGa* Brahman, and when we have an apprehension of Brahman, it is *nirguGa* Brahman. As Radhakrishnan says that the infinite is not an object constructed by philosophy, it is an ever-present fact. According to Radhakrishnan, “The moment we think it, it becomes a part of the world of experience.”¹⁴

While the Upanicads tried to account for Brahman negatively. In the Upanicads, the best way of knowing Brahman is described negatively Brahman is not knowable. If by knowability is meant an object of knowledge, Brahman, in this sense is not knowable. We cannot know Brahman as what Brahman is, for to know what Brahman is, is to know *Him* as such. That is why, the best way of knowing Brahman is as ‘*not-this*’, ‘*not this*’, ‘*wait*’, ‘*wait*’. According to the negative method, “It is not one, it is not two, it is not absolute, it is not non-absolute, it is not sunny, it is not any.”¹⁵ So, the best way of describing Brahman is through negatives (*neti neti*) by calling it infinite, immutable, indivisible, inexhaustible and so on. “The two ‘no’-es in the formula ‘*neti neti*’ are meant for emphasizing the fact that whatever can be presented as an object is ultimately unreal... There is no better way of describing the Absolute than this negative method. But it should be never missed that all these negations pre-suppose and point towards the positive Brahman.”¹⁶

Conclusion:

In view of the above, it can be said that the significance of the term ‘*neti neti*’ lies in the fact that it is impossible to know Brahman through our ordinary concepts or means of expression. Positive knowledge is in a sense a limitation, for it involves the duality of the knower and known, the denotative and the denoted. Hence, the concept of ‘*neti neti*’ denies the possibility of such knowledge or expression with regard to Brahman. Even the expression ‘*neti neti*’ denies the knowability of Brahman. But then, the question is: Does this lead the Advaitism of ŚaEkara to agnosticism? Certainly not, for it does not deny the Brahman itself, since the negative means negates all the features of Brahman. Thus, it does not lead the Advaitism of ŚaEkara to agnosticism. As it is said “The denial of attributes and qualities to Brahman does not reduce it to voidness or in any way consign Advaitism to agnosticism, because the expression ‘*neti neti*’ does not deny Reality in its transcendental and absolute nature.”¹⁷ This is how ŚaEkara reasserts the central theme which runs throughout his rationalistic interpretation of Vedānta, that Brahman the self-revealing consciousness, the pure being, beyond all qualification and determination. It cannot be grasped by the ordinary empirical knowledge, which is limited and conditioned. That is, we may have a glimpse of the absolute Reality, through the negative description which serves the purpose of rising up from the phenomenal level towards the highest and finally help the realization of the Brahman or Secondless Absolute. When there is Brahman knowledge, there is destruction of ignorance. This is what according to ŚaEkara ‘Release’. For ŚaEkara, “release results from Brahman knowledge; and that (release) consists in the removal of evil and the attainment of the unsurpassable Brahman bliss; hence is established the fruit.”¹⁸ This is, in brief, all about the ŚaEkara’s thesis on Advaitam Brahman, which is alone the true reality (*pāramārthika*).

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