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# Shankara's World View

### Classical Indian Philosophy

There are nine schools of classical Indian philosophy. The Sanskrit term that is roughly equivalent to the Greek *philosophia* is *darshana*, which means "vision" or "point of view." Six of the classical Indian darshanas — Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Purva-Mimamsa, and Vedanta — accept the authority of the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, the Vedas, and are thus traditionally described as "orthodox" (astika). The other three schools — Carvaka (a now-defunct materialist school), Buddhism (which itself includes several distinct philosophical traditions), and Jainism — are traditionally considered "unorthodox" (nastika) because they do not accept the authority of the Vedas. In the course of time, the six orthodox schools came to be organized into three groupings of two schools each: Samkhya-Yoga, Nyaya-Vaisheshika, and Mimamsa-Vedanta.

### The Vedas, the Sutras, and the Commentaries

There are four collections of Vedic scriptures: the Rig-Veda, the Yajur-Veda, the Sama-Veda, and the Atharva-Veda. Each of the Vedas

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contains four collections of writings: (1) Samhitas, compilations of hymns, prayers, rites, mantras, and magical incantations and spells (c. 1500-900 BC); (2) Brahmanas, commentaries on and liturgical arrangements of the Samhitas for use in worship services (c. 850 BC); (3) Aranyakas, “Forest Treatises” on the use of the Samhitas in the practice of meditation by “forest dwellers,” those who have retired from the world to the forests in search of spiritual liberation (c. 500 BC); and (4) Upanishads, philosophical writings on major themes of Hinduism such as Brahman, Atman, samsara, karma, moksha, and so forth (c. 800-500 BC).

Taking the Vedic scriptures as their point of departure, the early philosophical movements in India — both orthodox (in support of the Vedas) and unorthodox (in opposition to the Vedas) — set forth their basic doctrines in aphoristic texts known as sutras (“threads”). A sutra is a shorthand statement of a philosophical principle. The purpose of a sutra’s succinctness is to make the principle it summarizes easy to memorize and thus to transmit from one generation to another. However, the classical collections of sutras, which became the foundational texts of the various darshanas of classical India, were hard to understand because of their cryptic brevity. Thus, in the course of time, thinkers in the various schools found it necessary to amplify and explain the sutras in detailed and lengthy commentaries such as Shankara’s major work, his *Commentary on the Vedanta Sutras*. An important unorthodox commentary is that of the Buddhist logician, Dharmakirti (600-670 AD), the *Pramanavartikki*, a commentary on the work of the earlier Buddhist logician, Dignaga (c. 480-540 AD).

Orthodox Hindus view the Vedic scriptures as *shruti*, i.e., divinely originated. Shruti means “that which is heard,” received directly from God. Shruti is thus regarded as absolutely authoritative. In addition to shruti, there are other writings in the Hindu tradition that have been influential in the development of Indian philosophical thought. The latter are not viewed as divine revelation (shruti) but are called *smriti* (“that which is remembered,” tradition). Smriti are considered authoritative only in so far as they are derived from or consistent with the content of the Vedas. In the category of smriti, there are the sutras and the commentaries of the orthodox darshanas, which have already been mentioned. Other smriti are (1) the great epics, the *Mahabharata*, which includes the extremely important *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Ramayana*; (2) the Puranas (“Antiquities”), popular, poetic writings on humanity and the gods; and (3) the Dharma Shastras, treatises on duty

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and justice — e.g., the *Artha Shastra* (economic principles), the *Manu Shastra* (“Laws of Manu,” social and moral life), the *Shastra of Vajnavalkya* (justice and order in the life of the individual), and the *Kama Shastra* (the orderly and effective pursuit of pleasure). The epics, the Puranas, and the Dharma Shastras were all composed between 1000 BC and 200 AD. (The date of the *Bhagavad Gita* is c. 200 BC.)

## Religion and Mysticism in Classical Indian Philosophy

There is a close relationship between philosophy and religion in classical Indian thought. As stated above, the six orthodox darshanas are characterized as orthodox because of their acceptance of the authority of the Vedas. Of the three unorthodox schools, Buddhism and Jainism are considered religions as well as philosophies. Even Carvaka, an anti-religious philosophy (see below), emerged as a reaction to the Hindu tradition.

Consistent with their religious focus, Indian philosophers (with the exception of the Carvaka school) frequently appeal to traditional authorities such as the Vedas in seeking to establish their philosophical claims. They also recognize mystical intuition as a source of philosophical truth. That is, classical Indian philosophers often claim that ultimate truth can be apprehended only through direct and extraordinary spiritual experience. Such experience, based on the practice of yogic meditation, is said to lead the practitioner to “enlightenment,” which includes realization of his True Self and direct contact with Supreme Reality (Brahman, God). This kind of intuitionism and mysticism is a central feature of Indian thought, both ancient and modern.

## The Unorthodox Darshanas

The three unorthodox darshanas — Carvaka, Buddhism, and Jainism — all arose in the 6th century BC in opposition to the established Hindu religion of that time, which was based on the Vedic scriptures (especially the Samhitas and the Brahmanas).

**Carvaka:** The Carvaka school (Carvaka was the supposed founder of this school), also known as Lokayata (naturalism), attacked the religious practices and the mysticism of Hinduism and propounded a philosophy based on metaphysical materialism and epistemic skepticism. For Carvaka, religion is superstition. Reality is nothing but matter (earth, air, fire, and water) in motion in space and in time, and there can be no knowledge of anything beyond what is present to the

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senses. There are no gods, no life beyond bodily death, no transmigration or reincarnation of the soul, no spiritual liberation (moksha), no transcendence of the material world of nature. In addition to their denial of spiritual liberation as a proper goal of life, the Carvaka philosophers also rejected dharma, the performance of moral and social duty, viewing that as a form of self-denial rather than self-fulfillment. The only fulfillment or happiness available to human beings arises from the effective pursuit of the first two goals of life recognized in the Indian tradition: pleasure and worldly success.<sup>1</sup>

**Buddhism:** Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha (the “Awakened”) (563-483 BC), was an Indian prince who found Hinduism, his native religion, to be ineffective as a solution to the central problem of human existence — the problem of suffering. He came to see life as pervaded with suffering, and he identified selfish craving as the cause of that suffering. If selfish craving is the cause and suffering the effect, then the removal of the cause should remove the effect. The Buddha developed a way of life known as “The Noble Eightfold Path” (including Right Views, Right Intent, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration), which he presented to the world as the way to extinguish selfish craving and thus achieve liberation from suffering. The liberation that is to be found at the end of the Noble Eightfold Path is *nirvana*, a mode of existence devoid of desire, hatred, delusion, and suffering, a state of being completely different from that of ordinary human experience.

Thus, “Buddhism,” as the path of the Buddha came to be called, parted ways with the Hindu tradition and went on to become a major world religion in its own right. Having rejected Hinduism and the Vedas, Buddhism developed a huge collection of its own scriptures. These writings were composed in India between 500 BC and 100 AD and, in the course of time, appeared in two somewhat different versions and in two different languages — in Pali and in Sanskrit. They are known as the “Three Baskets,” *Tipitaka* in Pali and *Tripitaka* in Sanskrit. The Sanskrit Canon is considered primary by the Mahayana schools of Buddhism in Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, whereas the Pali Canon constitutes the sacred scriptures of the Theravada schools of Buddhism in Southeast Asia and in Sri Lanka (Ceylon).

**Jainism:** The founder of Jainism, the third unorthodox darshana, was Vardhamana, also known as Mahavira (“Great Teacher”) (599-527

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BC). Like Carvaka and Buddhism, Jainism rejects the Hindu religion and denies the authority of the Vedas. Jainism is non-theistic, but it teaches that there is a line of twenty-four saints (tirthankaras, “conquerors”), ancient teachers of Jain doctrine, who perfected themselves morally and spiritually, became god-like, and thus achieved liberation from suffering. Mahavira is considered the 24th tirthankara. Through adoration of the saints, and through right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct, a soul can attain release from karma, from the cycle of rebirth, and from suffering. “Right conduct” includes (1) the practice of non-violence or non-injury (ahimsa), (2) truthfulness, (3) non-stealing, (4) sexual restraint, and (5) non-attachment to worldly things. The basis of the Jain practice of non-violence is the view that all lives (including animal lives) are equally sacred and deserving of absolute respect.

## The Orthodox Darshanas

It may be that the orthodox schools of classical Indian philosophy emerged initially in defense of the Hindu tradition that had come under attack by Carvaka, Buddhism, and Jainism. In any case, all of the orthodox schools acknowledge the sacred authority of the Vedic scriptures and seek to develop philosophical perspectives that are based on the scriptures or that are at least not inconsistent with them.

**The Samkhya and Yoga Schools:** The Samkhya darshana may be the oldest of all Indian philosophies. Its originator is said to be Kapila, who lived in the 7th century BC. The *Samkhya-Pravacana Sutra* is sometimes attributed to Kapila, but that work seems to be a product of the 14th century AD. The earliest extant text in the Samkhya tradition is the *Samkhya Karika* by Ishvara Krishna (3rd century AD). Samkhya proposes a metaphysical dualism of individual souls (purushas) and nature (prakriti), and it seeks to explain the evolution of successive worlds on the basis of its two fundamental principles. Liberation of the soul from bondage results from the soul’s realization of its identity as purusha (spirit) as opposed to prakriti (matter). Such realization brings release from karma and rebirth.

The Yoga school is historically associated with Samkhya philosophy. A highly developed system of physical, moral, psychological, and mental discipline, Yoga is the practical application of Samkhya metaphysics. Samkhya, however, was originally atheistic; Yoga is theistic, subscribing to a monotheistic theology. The primary text of the Yoga school is the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali (2nd century BC).

**The Nyaya and Vaisheshika Schools:** Nyaya (Logic) and Vaisheshika (Atomism) are schools that specialize in questions of epistemology and metaphysics. Nyaya and Vaisheshika were originally separate schools founded in the 3rd century BC. However, these two schools of thought were combined in the work of the Nyaya philosopher, Udayana (10th century AD).

Based upon the *Nyaya Sūtras* of Gautama (3rd century BC) and the later commentary on the Sūtras, the *Nyaya Bhashya* by Vatsyayana (3rd century AD), Nyaya, which assumes the metaphysical atomism of Vaisheshika, is a system of formal logic and a theory of knowledge that traces human cognition to certain basic epistemic sources or “means of right knowledge” (pramanas), namely, sense perception, logical inference, analogy, and authoritative testimony (such as the “testimony” contained in the Vedas). The Nyaya school is also known for its various attempts to construct formal proofs of the existence of God (a single Supreme Being who is the Creator of the universe).

The Vaisheshika school probably originated with Kanada’s *Vaisheshika Sūtras* (3rd century BC) although some scholars trace the school’s origin back as early as the 6th century BC. According to Vaisheshika, the universe is composed of extremely small and thus invisible anu (atoms). Vaisheshika was originally non-theistic; but when Udayana brought Vaisheshika and Nyaya together in his synthesis of the two systems, Nyaya’s theism became the official position of the combined school.

**The Purva-Mimamsa and Vedanta Schools:** Jaimini’s *Purva-Mimamsa Sūtra* (3rd century BC) is the foundational text of the Purva-Mimamsa school. Purva-Mimamsa (“earlier investigation”) is primarily concerned with questions of Vedic interpretation, especially with regard to the sacrifices and rituals prescribed in the first two parts of each of the Vedas, the Samhitas and the Brahmanas. Purva-Mimamsa seeks to explain why the Vedas are sacred and why we are obligated to perform our religious and moral duty (dharma) in accordance with Vedic teachings. It also subscribes to the realistic metaphysical view that there exists an objective world independent of human consciousness and to the common-sense view that knowledge arises either from direct perception or from a process of inference based on direct perception.

Vedanta (also known as Uttara-Mimamsa, “later investigation”)<sup>2</sup> is the most influential of the classical Indian philosophical schools. It derives from three main originary sources: the Upanishads, the *Vedānta*

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*Sutras (Brahma Sutra)*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*. There are three major sub-schools of Vedantic thought: (1) Non-Dualism (Advaita), (2) Qualified Non-Dualism (Vishishtadvaita), and (3) Dualism (Dvaita). Shankara is the outstanding figure in the Non-Dualist tradition, whereas the leading representatives of Qualified Non-Dualism and Dualism are Ramanuja (1017-1137 AD) and Madhva (1197-1275 AD), respectively.

These versions of Vedanta are distinguished from one another by their differing answers to certain questions concerning God, the soul, and the world. The three schools of Vedanta agree that there is a single Supreme Reality (Brahman), but they do not agree on its nature. The Non-Dualists hold that Brahman is an absolutely transcendent being without any of the personal characteristics ordinarily attributed to “God” by religiously oriented people. Brahman, for the Non-Dualists, is Pure Consciousness. The Qualified Non-Dualists and the Dualists understand Brahman to be Ishvara (“the Lord God”), a personal creator-savior God; and both of these schools teach that the religious path of worship of and devotion to God is the way to salvation.

For the Non-Dualists, there is a single True Self (Atman), which is identical with Brahman. Individual souls (selves) and the many individual entities that make up the universe are not “really real” but rather are mere appearances of Brahman-Atman. Only Brahman-Atman is truly real. Realization of this truth is the key to liberation (moksha) from samsara, the beginningless and endless cycle of birth, death, rebirth, and suffering that constitutes human bondage. The cause of this bondage is ignorance of one’s true nature, and therefore knowledge of one’s true nature brings release from bondage. This true nature is Atman, which is one and the same as Brahman. To know and experience this Supreme Identity is to achieve liberation from samsara.

Vedantic Dualism is diametrically opposed to the Non-Dualist perspective on Brahman, self, and world. For the Dualists, there are metaphysically real distinctions (1) between God (Brahman-Ishvara) and the individual self (Atman), (2) between God and matter, (3) between one individual self and other individual selves (i.e., there are many individual selves or souls, many Atmans), (4) between selves and the material world (subject-object realism), and (5) between one material thing and all other material things (i.e., there is a plurality of material entities).

The Qualified Non-Dualists hold to the same metaphysical distinctions made by the Dualists, but they view these as distinctions *within* Brahman. Like the Non-Dualists, the Qualified Non-Dualists

hold that only Brahman is really real; but unlike the Non-Dualists, the Qualified Non-Dualists believe that there are, within the One Supreme Reality of Brahman, real distinctions between God and self, between self and self, between God and nature, between self and nature, and between the many material entities that make up the world of nature.

## Shankara's Darshana

The keynote of Shankara's philosophical thought is the Upanishadic declaration, *tat tvam asi* (Sanskrit for "That thou art"). This is a major theme in chapter six of the *Chandogya Upanishad*: "Now that which is the subtle essence, the root of all things, the Ground of Being — in it all that exists has its True Self. It is Pure Being. It is the True Self, and *That thou art*" (6.8.7).<sup>\*</sup> In Shankara's view, this means that the individual soul or self (jiva) is essentially one with the Universal Self (Atman), which itself is identical with Absolute Reality (Brahman). The idea that there are many individual and separate selves (polypsychism) is a delusion caused by spiritual ignorance (avidya). There is only one True Self (Atman) (monopsychism).

Since Brahman alone is absolutely and independently real, the entire world of ordinary experience has no independent existence. Rather, the world is a mere appearance of Brahman. On the basis of ignorance, the world is taken to be ultimately real, and its limitations and attributes are then superimposed upon Brahman. All living beings are trapped in samsara and are destined to live out the accumulated consequences of their actions in past lives, all in accordance with the law of karma. Release from samsara is achieved through knowledge (jñana) of True Reality (the Brahman-Atman unity). Such knowledge is acquired through various means, including the study of sacred scriptures, philosophical thinking and inquiry, and the practice of yogic meditation.

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<sup>\*</sup>Many classical Hindu texts such as the Upanishads, the Sutras, and so forth, are organized by chapter, section, and stanza or verse. Thus, a notation in this chapter such as "(6.8.7)" refers to the chapter, section, and stanza or verse of the work cited, in this case, the *Chandogya Upanishad*.

### **Self and Not-Self — The Error of Superimposition<sup>3</sup>**

Shankara's philosophical perspective is grounded on a distinction between Self and Not-Self, between subject and object. He holds that it is obvious that subject and object — Self and Not-Self — are essentially different and thus cannot be identified with each other. It is a mistake, he argues, to superimpose upon the subject or Self (the "I," whose nature is consciousness) the characteristics of the object or Not-"I" (which is non-conscious), and to superimpose upon the object (Not-"I") the attributes of the subject ("I"). There is a natural human tendency, rooted in ignorance (avidya), not to distinguish clearly between subject and object — although they are, in fact, absolutely different from each other — and "to superimpose upon each the characteristic nature and attributes of the other." According to Shankara, this leads to a confusion of the real (Self) and the apparent (Not-Self) and causes us to say such things as "I am that," "That is mine," and so on. In Shankara's Advaita version of Vedanta philosophy, Self (Atman) is "really" (or ultimately) real while that which is Not-Self is only provisionally real, not "really" or ultimately real, but rather an appearance that both hides and suggests reality. Thus, to say such things as "I am a student" or "This is my body" is to falsely identify the Not-Self with the Self, the apparent with the real.

How, Shankara wonders, do the nature and attributes of objects (or objectivity) come to be superimposed upon the Self, which is not an object but rather a pure subject (or subjectivity)? Responding to those who say that we can superimpose the nature and attributes of an object only on such other objects as appear to us in sense perception and that the Self, which is entirely distinct from the Not-Self, is never an object of sense perception, Shankara makes two points: First, he holds that the Self is not a non-object absolutely. It is an object in the sense that it is that which is denoted by the term "I;" moreover, we know that the Self has real and objective existence since it is immediately present within the sphere of direct intuitive experience. Shankara's second point is that it is not true that the nature and attributes of objectivity can be superimposed only on such objects as appear before us in sense experience. Here, he gives the example of those (uninformed people) who believe that the ether (which is not an object of sense perception) has a blue color. In Vedanta cosmology, the "ether" is the most fundamental physical element. It arises out of Brahman and then gives rise to earth, air, fire, and water, the four basic components of the

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material world. The ether continues to exist in all material things and fills all space beyond the earth's atmosphere. From earth, the ether is perceived as "the sky" and is commonly (but incorrectly) taken to be blue in color.

For Shankara, subject-object and object-subject superimposition (*adhyasa*) are grounded on ignorance (*avidya*) and illusion (*maya*). Knowledge (*vidya*, *jñana*) is the comprehension of the true nature of the Self as distinguished from that which is falsely superimposed upon it. Those who acquire such knowledge recognize that neither the Self nor the Not-Self is in any way affected by any good or bad quality "produced by their mutual superimposition."

However, many everyday beliefs and practices seem to be based on the kind of ignorance Shankara describes. He takes as an example certain aspects of the Hindu religion that were commonly accepted in his day. Those who have risen from ignorance to knowledge understand that the True Self is free from all desires, that it stands above the distinctions of the caste-system (Brahmin, Kshatriya, etc.), that it transcends transmigratory existence (i.e., the process of reincarnation). However, the ordinary Hindu believes that sacrifices to the gods and other religious rituals produce rewards and well-being. Such beliefs and practices, says Shankara, are rooted in ignorance of the true nature of the Self. Such directives as "A Brahmin is to perform sacrifices" are "operative only on the assumption that particular conditions such as caste, stage of life, age, outward circumstances, and so on" can be superimposed upon the Self.

Shankara gives other examples of the error of superimposition: When a man considers himself to be sound and fulfilled (or not) so long as his wife and children are sound and fulfilled (or not), he is superimposing Non-Self attributes upon the Self. When "a man thinks of himself (i.e., *his Self*) as fat, lean, fair, or as standing, walking, or jumping," he is then superimposing attributes of the body upon the Self. "If he thinks 'I am mute, or deaf, or one-eyed, or blind,'" he is then identifying the Self with attributes of the sense organs. Finally, if he believes himself (i.e., *his Self*) to be "subject to desire, intention, doubt, determination, and so on," he is attributing the psychological activities and characteristics of the ego (*jiva*) to the Self (*Atman*), whereas the Self is the transcendent witness of all the transformations of the psyche and the ego.

According to Shankara, false conceptions of the Self constitute the cause of all evil (pain, suffering, disorder, etc.). We suffer evil

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because of our ignorance of the Self. We can achieve freedom from such ignorance and the illusions it generates through the study of the *Vedanta Sūtras* (composed by Badarayana in the 1st century BC), which can lead us to knowledge of the true nature and absolute unity of the Self. This study begins, not directly with the Self (Atman), but with Brahman. The first of the *Vedanta Sūtras* is “then therefore the desire for knowledge of Brahman.”

## The Desire to Know Brahman

### Knowing Brahman

For Shankara, complete comprehension of Brahman is the highest good. Such comprehension destroys ignorance (*avidya*), the root of all evil and the seed of *samsara*, the beginningless and unending cosmic cycle of becoming, being, and dissolving.

Before beginning our inquiry into the nature of Brahman, Shankara suggests that we must first ask and answer a preliminary question: Is Brahman already known or not already known? If it is already known, then it seems that there is no need for inquiry about it; and if it is not already known, then how can we enter into such an inquiry at all?

Shankara replies to these questions as follows: Brahman is known in the sense that it is known to exist. The word “Brahman” is derived from the Sanskrit root *brih*, which means “to be great” (or “the greatest”). Thus, Brahman, “the greatest,” must exist and must be all-knowing, all-powerful, eternally pure, intelligent, and free.<sup>4</sup> This argument suggests the so-called “ontological argument” for the existence of God set forth by Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109 AD).<sup>5</sup> The gist of the argument is that the non-existence of the greatest conceivable being (“that than which nothing greater can be conceived”) is impossible because the idea of a non-existent superlative being is self-contradictory. A non-existent being simply is not the greatest conceivable being. Shankara seems to be thinking about Brahman in this way.

Moreover, Shankara continues, the existence of Brahman is known because it is the Self of everyone. Everyone is directly aware of the existence of his own Self, and no one ever thinks “I am not.” If the existence of the Self were not known with certainty, it would be possible for one to think “I am not.”<sup>6</sup> Again, Shankara seems to anticipate a major Western philosopher: According to René Descartes

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(1596-1650 AD), I cannot think that I do not exist because, if I am thinking, then I must exist. “I think; therefore, I am.”<sup>7</sup> Shankara is apparently thinking along the same lines, but he holds that this Self, whose existence is beyond doubt, is Brahman.

However, if it is generally recognized that Brahman is the Self, then is there any point in continuing our inquiry into these matters? Shankara replies to this question by citing various opinions as to the specific nature of the Self. Some of these opinions are as follows:

1. The Self is the body endowed with the quality of intelligence (a materialist view, also held by many unlearned people).
2. The Self is the “organs endowed with intelligence” (brain, heart, etc.) (another materialist view).
3. The Self is the “internal organ” (the brain and central nervous system) (yet another materialist view).
4. The Self is “a mere momentary idea” (a Buddhist view).
5. The Self is void or empty (another Buddhist view).
6. The Self is “a transmigrating being different from the body,” which is both the producer and the experiencer of the consequences of action (a Hindu view based on Nyaya philosophy).
7. The Self is a transmigrating being different from the body, which is the experiencer of the fruits of action, but which does not engage in action (another Hindu view based on Samkhya philosophy).
8. There are individual selves (souls) as well as an all-knowing, all-powerful cosmic Self (“the Lord God”) (another Hindu view based on Yoga philosophy).
9. Brahman (“the Lord”) is the True Self of the individual, whose individual soul is an appearance only, a product of ignorance (the Vedanta view, which Shankara endorses).

Thus, there are many opposing views as to the nature of the Self. According to Shankara, some of these perspectives are based on sound arguments and on correct interpretations of Vedic (scriptural) texts, while some are based on fallacious arguments and on Vedic texts misunderstood and misapplied. We must not, Shankara argues, embrace any one of these opinions without careful thought and consideration; for failing to comprehend the true natures of Brahman and the Self and the true relationship between them may well bar us from the bliss of

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spiritual liberation. For these reasons, an inquiry into the nature of Brahman and into the relationship between Brahman and the Self (Atman) is both possible and necessary.<sup>8</sup>

### **Brahman As the Cause of the World's Existence**

According to the second Vedanta Sutra, "Brahman is that from which the origin, subsistence, and dissolution of this world proceed." Shankara's interpretation of this sutra is that the all-knowing and all-powerful cause of the origin, subsistence, and dissolution of this world is none other than Brahman. The world contains a multitude of beings, is full of complex differences and distinctions, contains many actors and experiencers, and is the locus of innumerable actions and the consequences of actions. The overall arrangement and order of the universe is far beyond human comprehension. A world with these attributes cannot possibly proceed from anything other than an all-knowing and all-powerful Supreme Being. It cannot emerge from non-intelligent and non-conscious matter (pradhana, prakriti), nor from atoms, nor from non-being, nor from a being subject to transmigration and reincarnation, nor can it arise spontaneously from itself, without a cause to support it. This, Shankara claims, is obvious from scripture (the Vedas) and on the basis of rational inference, which the scriptures encourage as a means of supporting and understanding scriptural revelation.<sup>9</sup>

According to Shankara's reading of the Upanishads and the *Vedanta Sutras*, Brahman alone is originally and ultimately real. Nothing can exist independently of Brahman. Thus, Brahman is both the efficient and the material cause of the universe. That is, Brahman is the agent (efficient cause) that causes the world to be and also the substance of which the world is composed (or from which the world is projected) (material cause). For Shankara, the universe is not created "out of nothing" (*ex nihilo*) but out of Brahman.

There is, however, a problem here, with which Shankara and his followers have grappled. For Advaita Vedanta, Brahman is unchanging, whereas the world of experience (produced by and from Brahman) is evidently full of change. How is the changing universe related to the changeless Brahman? The problem does not arise with regard to efficient causation. It seems possible for an unchanging Supreme Being (Brahman) to command that the changing world exist ("Let there be light," and so forth). However, if Brahman is also the material

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(substantial) cause of the world, and if the world is changing, doesn't that mean that Brahman is also changing?

Shankara and his school distinguish between two kinds of material change: (1) *parinama* (change of substance, actual change) and (2) *vivarta* (change of appearance). (1) The following is an illustration of the parinama principle: Milk can be used to make cheese. In the process of cheese-making, the milk is transformed into cheese and becomes irrecoverable, i.e., once the cheese has been made, we cannot recover the milk. The milk has been changed into a substance other than itself. (2) For an example of the vivarta principle, consider the fashioning of a ring out of silver. In this case, the silver (the material cause) does not change into something other than itself. The silver now *appears* in the form of a ring, but it remains silver, and it could be refashioned into some other piece of jewelry. In a significant sense, the silver itself does not change when it is fashioned into a ring or other ornament. It continues to be what it is.

For Shankara, the relationship between Brahman and the world does not involve parinama. In producing the world, Brahman does not become the world. Brahman remains itself. However, in the process of creation, does Brahman take on the shape or form of the world, as does the silver that is used to make a ring? The vivarta concept comes closer to Shankara's understanding of the relationship between Brahman and the world. Brahman takes on the *appearance* of the world, as does the silver take on the appearance of a ring. In taking on the appearance of a ring, the silver itself is molded and shaped into a certain form. For Shankara, this is not what happens in the Brahman-world relationship. Shankara denies that Brahman, as the material cause of the universe, changes in any way whatsoever. Neither the parinama nor the vivarta view is satisfactory. They both presuppose that cause and effect are separate realities. In parinama, the material cause (e.g., milk) is transformed into a substance different from itself (e.g., cheese); and in vivarta, the material cause (e.g., silver) is changed into the shape of its material effect (e.g., a ring). Shankara's position is that the world is a mere appearance of Brahman caused by the powers of ignorance (*avidya*) and illusion (*maya*). There is no real creation. Brahman does not really act, nor does it change in any way.

Thus, for Shankara, it seems that Brahman is both the cause of the world's existence and not the cause of the world's existence. To avoid this apparent contradiction, Shankara utilizes a distinction between two

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ways in which the nature of Brahman is experienced and understood. This is the distinction between Saguna Brahman and Nirguna Brahman.

### **Saguna Brahman and Nirguna Brahman**

According to Shankara, Brahman is experienced in two forms: (1) as qualified by limiting conditions owing to the multiplicity of the names (mental entities) and forms (bodies) arising out of the cosmic evolutionary process (i.e., out of the plurality of the created world) and as possessing a plethora of attributes (e.g., truth, beauty, knowledge, consciousness, bliss, power); and (2) “as being the opposite of this, i.e., free from all limiting conditions whatever” and devoid of all attributes.<sup>10</sup> (1) refers to Saguna Brahman, Brahman “with attributes” (saguna); whereas (2) denotes Nirguna Brahman, Brahman “without attributes” (nirguna). Saguna Brahman is the personal God of religion, an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-present creator of the world and a divine savior to whom we owe our love and devotion. Nirguna Brahman is the Transcendent Absolute, having none of the attributes of associated with “God” in the various theistic religions of the world. Nirguna Brahman is, in essence, “the God beyond the God of theism,” a designation promoted by Paul Tillich in his famous essay on “Theology and Symbolism.”<sup>11</sup>

Many passages in the Vedas present Brahman as possessing the double nature of Saguna Brahman and Nirguna Brahman. Shankara interprets this to mean that Brahman *appears* differently to different people depending on whether the Supreme Being is the object either of knowledge (jñana) or of ignorance (avidya). From the standpoint of ignorance, Brahman is viewed as the object of religious devotion (“God”) by individual souls, whereas in reality (so says Shankara) these souls and Brahman are one. In Shankara’s view, one and the same Self (Atman) is present, although hidden, in all beings.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, Shankara holds that Brahman, when properly understood (i.e., from the standpoint of knowledge), is devoid of all attributes (Nirguna Brahman). When Brahman is described as possessing attributes such as truth, knowledge, or infinity, or when Brahman is described as Pure Being (sat), Pure Consciousness (chit), and Pure Bliss (ananda), these characterizations of Saguna Brahman (Brahman with attributes) are attempts to describe Brahman from the standpoint of ignorance. Such characterizations are, in reality, just words, and the true nature of Brahman cannot be described in words. The truth of the

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matter, according to Shankara, is that Brahman's true nature is completely devoid of any attributes.

When Brahman is said to be the efficient and material cause of the world's existence, it is Saguna Brahman, not Nirguna Brahman, that is so described. To speak of Brahman as the cause of the world presupposes a duality of Brahman and world, and such dualistic thinking is grounded on ignorance of the true nature of Brahman and Atman. Although Brahman is characterized in various Vedic texts as the efficient and material cause of the universe, Shankara holds that these texts refer to Saguna Brahman and that thinking of Brahman as saguna ("with attributes") constitutes only a preliminary view of Brahman, a view based on the human need to explain the apparent existence of the universe. However, in order to understand the true nature of Brahman, we must go beyond this preliminary view and understand Brahman as it is in itself, not in relation to the universe, i.e., in non-dualistic terms. At that level of comprehension, it is seen that the entire universe is nothing but a superimposition upon and mere appearance of Brahman, the underlying reality of all that is. In the knowledge of the true nature of reality, which is the Brahman-Atman unity, this superimposition is "sublated." (Sublation is the process of correcting our understanding by replacing false judgments with true judgments.)

This line of argument leads Shankara to his famous distinction between two levels of reality and understanding: (1) phenomenal or relative reality (*vyavaharika satya*), in which dualities and distinctions appear, and (2) transcendental and absolute reality (*paramarthika satya*), in which there are no dualities or distinctions whatsoever.<sup>13</sup> It is only from the phenomenal and relative standpoint of dualistic and distinctionist thought that Brahman (i.e., Saguna Brahman) is the cause of the existence of the universe. From the standpoint of absolute reality and understanding, there is nothing in existence other than the Brahman-Atman unity. Thus, in one sense, Brahman is the cause of the world's existence and, in another sense, Brahman is *not* the cause of the world's existence.

### **The Relationship between Brahman and Self**

According to Shankara, the *Vedanta Sstras* reveal the nature of Brahman. Devout and concentrated meditation on Brahman results in final release (*moksha*), and this final release brings us to a state of

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being that is eternal, all-encompassing, beyond all change, absolutely self-sufficient, containing no dualities or distinctions, and self-illuminating (i.e., being its own source of the light that reveals truth to consciousness). This state of being is, in fact, “*the same as Brahman.*”<sup>14</sup>

## The Brahman-Atman Unity<sup>15</sup>

There are, as Shankara demonstrates, many passages in the Vedas that affirm that final release follows immediately from the knowledge of Brahman and constitutes union with Brahman, e.g., “He who knows Brahman becomes Brahman” (*Mundaka Upanishad* 3.2.9). The same is affirmed in the *Nyaya Sutras* (the primary text of the Nyaya school of classical Indian philosophy): “Final release results from the successive removal of wrong knowledge, faults, activity, birth, pain, the removal of each later member of the series depending on the removal of the preceding member” (*Nyaya Sutras*, 1.1.2). According to Shankara, “wrong knowledge itself is removed by the knowledge of *one’s Self being one with the Self of Brahman.*”

Shankara also quotes the following passages from the Vedas in his effort to show that sacred scripture supports his view that the union of Self (Atman) with Brahman is not merely a combination or amalgamation of two different things but, on the contrary, that Self and Brahman are really identical: “That (Brahman) thou art” (*Tat tvam asi*) (*Chandogya Upanishad* 6.8.7); “I (the Self) am Brahman” (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 1.4.10); “This Self is Brahman” (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 2.5.19).

## The Origins and the Transcendence of Dualism

According to Shankara, the pluralistic universe and the multitude of individual selves are superimpositions upon the Supreme Reality, which is Brahman-Atman. When, through critical and reflective thinking, the superimposition of diverse attributes and limitations on Brahman-Atman is overcome (sublated), then the True Self, Atman, is disclosed and known as identical with Brahman. Just as the universe is in reality not other than Brahman, so the individual self (jiva) is in reality not other than Atman, which itself is also not other than Brahman. The real Self is the Atman, which is unchanging, eternally free, and the same as Brahman. When all this is realized, then the individual is no longer an individual and the universe is no longer the universe — all is Brahman.

Shankara supports his argument here with the following illustrations: Awakening to the True Self is like a person who has awakened from a dream in which he has “seen” an elephant but who sees it no longer when awake. Such a person realizes that the elephant was not real but only a dream-object, and yet he recognizes himself as the same person who “saw” the elephant in the dream. “The whole process is similar to that by which an imagined snake passes over into a rope as soon as the mind of the beholder has freed itself from its erroneous imagination.”<sup>16</sup>

If the individual self (jiva) is, in reality, identical with the universal Self (Atman) which, in turn, is identical with Brahman (Absolute Reality) — if jiva and Atman are “not two,” and if Atman and Brahman are “not two” — and if, in addition, the entire universe is, in fact, not different from Brahman, then why are dualities or distinctions of any kind experienced in the first place? If Non-Dualism is true, then what is the origin of dualistic experience? To this question, Shankara has no answer. He can say only that the experience of dualities and differences is inexplicable — something that the human mind can never fully comprehend. Since the logic of human thought is itself dualistic (operating on the basis of distinctions between true and false, valid and invalid, and so forth), and since dualistic thinking is a product of ignorance (avidya), there can be no satisfactory logical explanation of the ignorance (avidya) that gives rise to the experience of duality and difference. Given the inexplicability of the false consciousness of dualism, Shankara confines himself to the project of elucidating the way in which that false consciousness can be transcended (sublated).

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The primary source of the Carvaka-Lokayata system is the *Lokayata Sūtras*, composed by Brihaspati in the 7th or 6th century BC. However, this source is long lost. Most of what we know about Carvaka is derived from later writings of other schools of thought that portray the Carvaka point of view in a very negative light.

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<sup>2</sup>The advent of Vedanta or Uttara-Mimamsa philosophy was preceded historically by the development of Purva-Mimamsa thought. The Vedanta school was originally characterized as “later investigation” (uttara-mimamsa) not only for reasons of chronology but also because of its concentration on the last two parts of the Vedas, the Aranyakas and the Upanishads, in contrast to the Purva-Mimamsa (“earlier investigation”) preoccupation with the first two parts of the Vedas, the Samhitas and the Brahmanas. In time, Uttara-Mimamsa came to be known as “Vedanta,” which means “end of the Vedas.”

<sup>3</sup>See Shankara, *Vedanta-Sutras with the Commentary by Sankaracarya*, trans. George Thibaut, in *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. F. Max Muller, Vol. 34 (Part I) (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), 3-9.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>5</sup>See “Anselm’s *Proslogium*” in *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S.N. Deane (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 2d ed., 1962), 47-80.

<sup>6</sup>Shankara, *Vedanta-Sutras*, 14.

<sup>7</sup>See René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980).

<sup>8</sup>Shankara, *Vedanta-Sutras*, 14-15.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 15-17.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>11</sup>Paul Tillich, “Theology and Symbolism,” in *Religious Symbolism*, ed. F. Ernest Johnson (New York: The Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1955), 114.

<sup>12</sup>Shankara, *Vedanta-Sutras*, 61-62.

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, *Ibid.*, 137-139, and also Vol. 38 (Part II) of the same work, 331-419.

<sup>14</sup>Shankara, *Vedanta-Sutras*, 25, 28 (italics added).

<sup>15</sup>See *Ibid.*, 29-31.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 188-189.