

Revisiting Śankara's Metaphysics*

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Introduction

Indian philosophy stands as one of the foremost Eastern traditions of abstract metaphysical enquiry. Indian philosophy, expressed in the Indo-European language of *Sanskrit*, comprises of many diverse metaphysical schools of thought and includes a substantial body of intellectual debate and argumentation among the various schools of *darśana* and their diverse positions. Metaphysics, as understood in Western sense, constitutes the most important part of doing philosophy in India. Metaphysical enquiry into the question of the nature of a Supreme Being and it's relation to the world, are debated among different systems of *darśana* like Buddhism, Advaita Vedānta and theistic Vedānta contributing much to this debate. Buddhist philosophy promotes the idea of the interdependence of everything; theistic Vedānta finds no gap between the world and God (the world is God's body); and Advaita Vedānta insists that everyone's true self is nothing other than *Brahman*, the Absolute. As academic philosophy in India is deeply conversant with Western philosophy, it addresses many of the same issues and methods. It would, however, be quite wrong to think of metaphysics as a uniquely 'Western' phenomenon. Classical Indian philosophy, and especially Buddhism, Jaina philosophy, Vedānta philosophy and Sāṃkhya philosophy also can be considered as a very rich source of metaphysics. In this paper, I have made an attempt at understanding the metaphysical position of Śankara under the following heads: 1) The doctrine of *Brahman*, 2) a

brief reference to the doctrine of *Vivartavāda* and of *Māyā* (which is although generally discussed under epistemology), 3) the doctrine of *Mokṣa*.

Metaphysics and epistemology are very closely interrelated in Śankara's philosophy. In his epistemology, Śankara expressed distrust for a kind of logical reasoning that is rhetorical, and was looking for metaphysical principle which was to be established solely on the basis of experience, though supplemented by logic as well. According to S. Radhakrishnan, metaphysics is a consideration of what is implied in the fact of experience. Its problem is not one of observing and tabulating the facts of consciousness; it is concerned with what the existence of facts implies regarding the nature of reality. The business of metaphysics, according to Śankara, consists in a synthetic and critical evaluation rather than an analytical and classifications of the objects of experience. Metaphysics, in other words, is an enquiry into the nature of reality; it is not a science of the existents. Metaphysics for him is the *parāvidyā* whose special concern is the study of the indestructible. The moral and the psychological distinction made by certain *Upaniṣads* between the pursuit's of the higher and the lower goods is raised by Śankara to the status of the metaphysical tenet. The division of knowledge into *parā* and *aparā* corresponds to their respective fruits or consequences, namely, prosperity and release.

The Doctrine of *Brahman*

The metaphysical quest is a search for '*ontos*', or 'Being', a study of reality, which plays a pivotal role in Śankara's Advaita Vedānta. Śankara defines reality as "that the ascertained nature of which does not undergo any change."¹ At another place he says, "that object which necessarily remains what it is, is truly real."² The most distinguishing feature

of Śankara’s Advaita is the concept ‘reality’ which is none other than the Unqualified *Brahman* (*Nirguṇa Brahman*). *Brahman* is one and the only reality and is admitted as devoid of all determinations (*Nirviśeṣa*). Plotinus’ transcendent and ineffable One or God is in itself beyond all qualifications of thought and is in this sense similar to Śankara’s *Brahman*.³ Hence the philosophy of Advaita is often named as *Nirviśeṣa BrahmaVāda* (doctrine of Unqualified *Brahman*). This *Nirviśeṣa Brahma-Vāda*, however, has its root in the scriptures.

Śankara’s Advaita is rooted in the *Upaniṣads*. At a time when false doctrines were misguiding people and orthodoxy had nothing better to offer than a barren and outmoded ritualism counteracting the atheism of the heterodox, Śankara expounded the philosophy of the *Upaniṣads*. Though he was a great logician he did not aim at logical and analytical skill alone. His was a conviction and authority born of living experience. It was out of his own self-evidencing plenary experience that Śankara poured forth his philosophy which bears the name “Advaita”. He set up a model in thinking and exposition which subsequent philosophers in India have striven to follow. His works are characterized by penetrating insight and analytical skill. He wrote stupendous works both in prose and verse; and all of them are marked by lucidity of language and depth of thought. Among his major works are the great commentaries on what are known as the three canons (*Prasthānatraya*) of Vedānta, namely, the principal *Upaniṣads*, the *Bhagavad-Gīta*, and the *Brahma-sūtra*, and such independent manuals as the *Upadeśasāhasrī* and the *Vivekacūdāmani*. If we analyse Śankara’s writings, we find that he summarises his whole philosophy in the following manner.

“*Slokārdhena pravakṣyāmi yaduktam granthakotibhih
brahma satyam jaganmithyā jī vo brahmaiva nāparah*”.

This means, "I would explain in half a verse which is said in crores of books of wisdom, that – *Brahman* is the only real, the world is illusory, the individual self (*Jīva*) and *Brahman* are essentially one and the same".

Meaning of '*Brahman*'

The word '*Brahman*' is derived from the Sanskrit root '*br̥h*' which means 'to grow' or 'let grow' or 'to be great', 'to increase', 'to expand well', "that which has reached its ultimate evolution, development, expansion or growth".⁴ Because of its greatness, the Absolute is called *Brahman*. It is known as *Brahman* as it is "fully accomplished and the greatest of all." Again it is known as *Brahman* as "it is (fully) grown and makes other things grow."⁵ Śankara in his *BrahmaSūtraBhāṣya* defines *Brahman* as "*Janmādyasya Yataḥ*"⁶ which means that *Brahman* is that from which origin, sustenance, and destruction of this world proceeds. In other words, *Brahman* is the cause and effect of the world that we see and we do not see. This spatio-temporal world of causality is dependent on *Brahman* from beginning to the end. There is difference of opinion among writers like Professor Deussen, Roth, Oldenberg, Hillebrandt and Radhakrishnan about the etymological and chronological meaning of the word *Brahman*. Even if we call it by different names like 'absolute', 'the great', 'world producing energy', etc., the word '*Brahman*' is finally taken in the sense of Ultimate Reality to which phenomenal reality and its evolution is due.

The *Nirguṇa* (Unqualified) *Brahman*

There are scriptural passages which characterize *Brahman* as the cause of the world,⁷ as well as the home of all auspicious qualities.⁸ Now the problem arises regarding reconciliation of the two views, the view that *Brahman* is the Absolute, without characteristics, and the view

which characterizes it as the cause of the world, and as endowed with attributes. Śankara solves this problem by postulating two standpoints, namely, the absolute (*Pāramārthika*) and the relative (*Vyāvahārika*). The supreme truth is that *Brahman* which is non-dual and relationless. It alone is; there is nothing real besides it. But from the empirical, relative standpoint which we adopt when we speak of *Brahman*, it appears as God, the cause of the universe, as what is related, and as endowed with attributes.⁹ Thus, *Brahman*, that is unconditioned or relationless, and that is without attributes and qualifications, is called *Īvara* when viewed in relation to the empirical world and empirical souls. *Brahman* is one and the same *Nirguṇa* (attributeless) and *Saguṇa* (with attributes). Śankara says, “*Brahman*, verily, is known to be of two forms, and that which, on the contrary, is devoid of all adjuncts... Although *Brahman* is one, it is taught in the Vedānta texts as what is to be meditated upon as being related to assumed adjuncts, and as what is to be known as being devoid of any relation to adjuncts”¹⁰ Further, *Vedānta Paribhāṣā* outlines the nature of *Brahman* in two ways, namely, (i) *svarūpa-lakṣaṇa* (essential nature), that is, by definition with reference to the essence, and (ii) by *tatastha-lakṣaṇa* (accidental nature), that is, by definition with reference to accidents. On this Śankara opines that creatorship etc., are *tatastha lakṣaṇa* of *Brahman* whereas *satyam jñānam anantam* is its *svarūpa lakṣaṇa*.¹¹ Thus, we saw that following the spirit of the *Upaṇiṣads*, Śankara reconciles the two aspects of *Brahman* adopting a distinction between *Brahman* as it is in itself and *Brahman* as is conceived by us in relation to the world. The former is called *Para-Brahman*, the latter *Apara-Brahman*. The former is called *Nirguṇa Brahman*, the latter is called *Saguṇa Brahman*. It is to be noted here that the *Nirguṇa Brahman* is not a mere negation. To quote Dr. Radhakrishnan, “When

the Absolute is said to be *Nirguṇa*, this only means that it is trans-empirical, since *guṇas* are products of *prakṛti* and the Absolute is superior to it. The *guṇas* qualify the objective as such and God is not an object.”¹²

Nirguṇa Brahman is also called *Paramārthatattva* (the highest entity),¹³ *Sat*,¹⁴ without attributes,¹⁵ *Bhūmā* (unexcelled),¹⁶ Self-identical, uniform in nature, real and yet devoid of the nature of the world, without part, *Vibhu*,¹⁷ pure and perfectly stainless,¹⁸ though beyond time and space everything is permeated by it. It is devoid of name and form. It is strictly one.¹⁹ It is immediate and direct,²⁰ the innermost self.²¹ It is of the nature of eternal knowledge, without interior or exterior, consisting only of knowledge, all pervading like the ether and of infinite power, the self of all. It is unseen seer, the unheard listener, the unthought-of thinker, and the unknown knower.²² All these do not suggest that *Brahman* is mere blank; an abyss which swallows up all the finites but rather it is fullness of Being. To quote Professor Hiriyanna, “What is meant by speaking of *Brahman* as featureless is that it transcends the distinction between substance and attributes. So the *Upaniṣad* says, ‘*nirguṇo guṇī*’.” *Brahman* has neither genus nor differentia that it can be defined. Śankara admits that even the definition of *Brahman* as *Saccidānanda* is imperfect though it expresses the reality in the best way possible. Only *brahmānubhava*, the realization of *Brahman*, gives the insight into *Brahman*, and the best way to express one-self is by maintaining silence when words fail to express that which is beyond description. For example, Bādhva, when asked by Bāṣkali for a definition of *Brahman*, expounded it in the language of silence. When repeatedly pressed for a definition he cried out, -“We are telling you, only you do not understand, this *ātman* is silence.”²³ Henry Bergson too says that no amount of concepts can exhaust the nature of finite individual even what to tell of the Absolute.

Now it can be said that the above account of *Brahman* could give rise to a suspicion that *Brahman* is pure abstraction, 'an uncomfortable night of nothingness', 'an indeterminate blank'. Śankara conceives it as the highest reality. As Radhakrishnan says, "It does not follow that it is pure nothing since the negative has it's meaning only in relation to the positive."²⁴ An assumption that nothing is intelligible unless qualified by a quality will land us in infinite regress as that quality will need further quality to qualify it. It is described in Śankara neither as 'this' nor as 'that' (*neti, neti*), the way it is defined in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. Eliot Deutsch says that the via negative of Advaita Vedānta also safeguards the unqualified oneness of that state of being called *Brahman* and rules out all arguments that would seek either to demonstrate or to refute it. Human language has its source in phenomenal experience which is limited in its application to the state of being that is beyond that experience. In favour of the above view, Deussen upholds that *Nirguṇa Brahman* is the last unknowable origin of the existent. Negation of quality does not mean negation of existence of *Brahman*. *Brahman* is *kāstha nitya*, one who remains uniform in all times. It is *trikāla-satya*, *trikālabādhita*, that which is not sublated in any period. There is nothing real which is not existent. *Brahman* is the essence of existence, *satyasya satyam*.²⁵

Different Ways to Define *Brahman*

Nirguṇa Brahman as Distinctionless (*Abheda*)

Nirguṇa Brahman is beyond the Vedntic theory of distinctions (*Bheda*). According to this theory, there are three types of distinctions, 'Vijāīya bheda', heterogeneous distinction, the distinction between two different classes of things, for example, the distinction between a cow and a horse; 'Sajāīya bheda', homogeneous distinction, the distinction

between two cows. While these two are the two kinds of external distinction, there is a third kind of distinction, namely, internal distinction (*Svagata bheda*), which exists within an object, between its different parts, for example, the distinction between the tail, horns and legs of a cow. Śankara's *Nirguṇa Brahman* is free from all above kinds of distinctions.

Nirguṇa Brahman as Existence-Consciousness-Bliss (Sat-Cit-ānanda)

Though the definition of *Brahman* as existence, consciousness and bliss is imperfect, it expresses reality in best possible way. To put the definition in *Sanskrit*, "*Sat kim? Kālatrayeṣu tiṣṭhati iti sat.*" This means, "What is existence? That which abides in all the three periods - past, present and future." "*Cit kim? Jñāna-svarūpam.*" This means, "What is consciousness? It is of the nature of knowledge". "*ānandah kaḥ? Sukha-svarūpah.*" This means, "What is bliss? It is the nature of pleasure." Thus, in the form of *Sat-Cit-ānanda*, *Brahman* is present within everything. It is the mark of every appearance of the worldly objects. Everything in this world has five elements in its make-up, namely, existence (*astī*), manifestation (*bhātī*), lovability (*priyam*), name (*nāma*) and form (*rūpa*). Of these the last two vary from object to object. They are not constant, and are products of *māyā*. They are the stuff of the world, and are unreal. But the first three constitute the essential nature of *Brahman* which is existence-consciousness-bliss. We speak of every object as existing (*astī*), as manifest (*bhātī*) and as being attractive (*priyam*). These characteristics which are common to all products really belong to *Brahman*.²⁶ In fact, these characteristics are not really the attributes of *Brahman*, rather the essence of it. Thus Śankara has conceived existence, consciousness and bliss as constituting the very essence of *Brahman*.

In terms of *Māyā*

Saguṇa (qualified) *Brahman*

Nirguṇa Brahman associated with *Māyā* is represented as God or *Īśvara*, the cause of the world. *Īśvara* is the qualified (*Saguṇa*) *Brahman*. He is the supreme personality. *Saguṇa Brahman* is not other than *Nirguṇa Brahman* when conceived with the adjunct of *Māyā*. The moment we try to think of *Brahman* in terms of intellectual categories, the moment we try to make this ultimate subject an object out of thought, it is converted into qualified God. *Īśvara* is the 'personal aspect of the impersonal *Brahman*'. *Brahman* is unqualified Pure being, Pure consciousness (*Caitanyamātrasattākam*), *Īśvara* as such is being-in-becoming. *Brahman* is inactive, *Īśvara* is active. God to an Advaitin is the personal aspect of the Absolute and the Absolute is the impersonal aspect of God, the Lord of *Māyā*. In *Nirguṇa Brahman* all distinctions are obliterated and are overcome, in *Saguṇa Brahman* they are integrated, a duality in unity is present here. *Nirguṇa Brahman* is a state of "spiritual enlightenment" (*jñāna*), *Saguṇa Brahman* is a state of "Vital loving awareness (*bhakti*)". "While God necessarily requires world and individual soul to be ruled by Him, *Brahman* is beyond all these. "*Saguṇa Brahman* is the content of loving experience of Unity, *Nirguṇa Brahman* is the content of intuitive experience of identity."²⁷

Īśvara or God is endowed with all auspicious qualities. He is omnipotent, omniscient, the cause of the origin, subsistence and dissolution of the entire world and also the object of worship. Radhakrishnan says, "The reality of *Īśvara*, in Śankara's philosophy, is not a self-evident axiom, is not a logical truth, but an empirical postulate which is practically useful."²⁸ *Īśvara* is both material and efficient cause of the world, is both suggested and directly expressed in different

Upaniṣads.²⁹ As spider prepares its cobweb out of its own saliva, it is both the efficient and the material cause of it, similarly *Īśvara* is the cause of the world.³⁰ He is the first cause since he has no origin.³¹ According to R. Otto, Śankara's Advaitic philosophy represents theism of high type, it is not simply the theism of old monastic *Upaniṣad*.³² *Īśvara* in Advaita is a spiritually significant principle from which derive all life and it's value. *Īśvara* is *Brahman* himself deprived of qualities. Max Muller says that the exoteric *Brahman* was substantially the same as the esoteric, that there was in reality and that there could be, one *Brahman* only, not two.

In terms of rational justification

The reasons that Śankara adduces for the existence of *Brahman* may be considered to be threefold.³³ Firstly, *Brahman* is the cause from which the "world has sprung into being." But it cannot be thought that *Brahman* itself has originated from something else – that will lead us to the theory of infinite regress (*anāvasthā doṣah*). Secondly, a non-intelligent source cannot be the cause of law and order of the universe – that intelligent source is none but *Brahman*. Thirdly, *Brahman* is that consciousness which always shines as the real self through the objects of the world. To deny *Brahman* is to deny ourselves.

Not in terms of proofs

Śankara's approach to the Ultimate reality is not rationalistic as the ultimate dimension of reality is beyond one's rational grasp. Kant says all proofs for the existence of God would lead to 'antinomies', Śankara believes that if we say that *Brahman* is the cause of the world it is on the authority of the *Upaniṣad*, not on the basis of logic and reasoning. Even if we admit the universality of causal relation is guaranteed, the category of causality cannot be applied to supra rational reality. Cosmological argument can promise only a 'finite creator of this finite creation.' If *Īśvara*

is the cause, he must fall within space and time, he will no more be infinite or omnipotent. The teleological proof can only point out the fact that a conscious principle is working at the root of creation. The ontological proof can give an idea of God and not God as a real object. Paul Deussen, too, does not think high of this argument. He remarks, "Indians are never ensnared into an ontological proof. On the other hand, we find a new proof in which the concept of God blends with the concept of the soul."³⁴ But Radhakrishnan does not agree with him and he remarks, "So far as any logical proof of *Brahman* is available in Śankara's writings, it is undoubtedly the ontological proof."³⁵ To him the idea of perfection leads to Reality that is *Brahman*. *Mokṣa* is only the other name for it.

Finally, for the existence of God "as Kant falls back on faith, Śankara leans on the authority of *Śruti* or the revealed texts rejecting the logical and the rational justification that is not supported by *Śruti*." He says that *Brahman* is proved on the basis of testimony of scriptures. Perception is not adequate means for knowing *Brahman* as *Brahman* cannot be an object of experience, nor can it be known by *anumāna*, inference.³⁶

Reasoning too has no solid foundation as it depends upon human mind.³⁷ Reason is insecure.³⁸ The question of *upamāna* does not arise as its field is very limited. In fact, the *pramāṇas* hold good only in the phenomenal world of *avidyā*³⁹ as rest in the *jīva*. How can these *pramāṇas* produce the sense and knowledge of reality in us? In reply Śankara points out that the *pramāṇas* do succeed in producing right knowledge, even as lines straight and crooked and letters such as 'a', 'i', become instrumental in the production of the cognition of real sound for letters. Reason, according to Śankara, is only "ancillary to revelation." Only *Śruti* can provide proofs for the existence of God. He puts *Śruti* on the highest dias because it is a record of realized experience which

'can fetch for us our goal earlier than by logical understanding.' At best, arguments can point out the possibility of God and at worst, they make atheism plausible, but they cannot help us in realizing the vision of God. But setting aside proofs for the existence of God does not mean denial of God altogether. Radhakrishnan says, "Śankara's point is that no purely rational argument for the existence of God as a personal Supreme Being is finally acceptable. At best the "proofs" only tell us that God is a possibility. The reality of God transcends our rational power of conceiving as well as comprehending; only if we resort to the spiritual insight of seers as recorded in the scriptures can we be certain of God."⁴⁰

In terms of gradations of reality:

Doctrine of Appearance (Vivartavāda)

Experience is always related to certain conditions and with changes in that particular experience is also sublated. For example, when we perceive a snake in the rope, some conditions may present such as feeble eyesight, tension of the nerves to dim light, etc. And after a while when the conditions are removed we perceive the rope. Therefore, reason cannot accept the verdict of experience as truth of experience is subject to certain conditions. In our empirical experience some facts are accepted as true at closer scrutiny which could then be denied. For example, we perceive silver in the shell which is illusory. The silver vanishes at closer scrutiny. This disappearance of the presentation of false percept makes the Advaitins think upon the issue seriously: Is the presentation real? Do we perceive appearance or reality? The solution to this problem is known as the doctrine of 'world-appearance' or 'Vivartavāda' in Śankara's Advaita.

Vivartavāda may be defined as the appearance of a higher reality as a lower one, as for example, when the transcendental

(*Pāramārthika*) Reality (*Brahman*) appears as the empirical (*Vyāvahārika*) reality (the world) or when an empirical reality, say a rope, appears as a seeming (*Prātibhāsika*) reality (a snake). But Śankara’s position is not of a subjective idealist as he himself refuted subjective idealism in his commentary on *Brahma Sūtra* 2.2.28-29. To him, the external world must exist because we perceive it. T.H.Green has rightly remarked that there is real external world – is one which no philosophy disputes.⁴¹ He emphasizes that the dream-state of consciousness and the waking-state of consciousness are not on a par. He wants to prove the unreality of the external world not by saying that it does not fall outside consciousness, but by saying that it is essentially indescribable as existent or as non-existent (*Sad-asadanirvacanīya*). Like Kant, Śankara also believes in the phenomenal appearance of the empirical world. Now, to that the world is an appearance necessarily points to something of which it is the appearance. The *Upaniṣads* declare that *Brahman* is the Reality and the empirical world is manifestation of the *Brahman*.

The concept of appearance and it’s relation to reality is discussed by Western Philosophers. By reality, the idealist philosophers like Bradley, mean that which is free from contradiction and is a self-consistent whole. For them, appearance is not reality as it is self-contradictory; appearance is always the appearance of the real. For Śankara, the real that must always exist as existence is the other name of real. It is also said in the *Gīta*, the real is not Non-existence. Śankara’s conception of Reality though based on the authority of the *Śruti*, is also sought to be explained through logic.

Doctrine of Error (*Anirvacanīya – Khyāti*)

The basic problem of Śankara’s philosophy is how the one *Brahman*, in ordinary experience, appears to be many and to be an

object? As he stated it in his introduction to the *BrahmaSūtraBhāṣya*, subject (*asmad*) and object (*yuṣmad*) are as opposed to each other as light and darkness, yet the properties of the one are superimposed on the other. If something is a fact of experience and yet ought not to be so – that is rationally unintelligible – then this must be false. According to Śankara’s doctrine of error, the false appearance is a positive, presented entity that is characterized neither as existent (because it is sublated when the illusion is corrected) nor as non-existent (because it is presented, given as much as the real is). The false, therefore, is indescribable (*anirvacanīya*) either as being or as nonbeing; it is not a fiction, such as a round square. The world and finite selves are not creations of *Brahman*; they are not real emanations or transformations of it. *Brahman* is not capable of such transformation or emanation. They are appearances that are superimposed on *Brahman* because of man’s ignorance. This superimposition was sometimes called *adhyāsa* by Śankara and was often identified with *avidyā*. Later writers referred to *avidyā* as the cause of the error. Thus, ignorance came to be regarded as a beginningless, positive something that conceals the nature of reality and projects the false appearances on it.⁴²

Māyā (Illusion)

The principle which accounts for the appearance of the world of plurality in the non-dual *Brahman* is *Māyā* or *avidyā*. To quote Śankara, “That which is supremely real is non-duality: through *Māyā* it appears as diverse, even as the plurality of moon on account of defective eyesight, or the rope appearing as a snake, water-streak, etc., and not in reality, for the Self is partless... The partless, unborn reality can by no means become different. This is the meaning. If what is immortal, unborn, and non-dual were to become really different, then it would become mortal, like fire becoming cool. But this is not acceptable, for a change of one’s

nature into it's contrary is opposed to all evidence. The unborn non-dual Self becomes different only through *Māyā*, not in reality.⁴³ Śankara refers to this principle, which makes the one appear as many, by different terms such as *Māyā*, *avidyā*, *prakṛti*, *avyakta*. “The seed-power (responsible for creation),” says Śankara, “is of the nature of nescience (*avidyā*); it is designated by the word *avyakta* (the unmanifest); it is dependent on God, is of the form of *Māyā*, the great sleep. In it the transmigrating souls sleep, being devoid of the knowledge of the Self. The unmanifest, indeed, is *Māyā*.”⁴⁴

Māyā is beginningless, indeterminable, and of the nature of the existent. It is said to be beginningless⁴⁵ because, if a beginning is predicted of it, there would be something antecedent to it, and this would lead to *infinite regress*. But *Māyā* is not beginningless in the sense in which *Brahman-āman* is. If it were really beginningless, there would be no end to it. So the beginninglessness of *Māyā* is like that of a perennial stream. To the questioning intellect *Māyā-avidyā* is a riddle. It cannot be defined as being either true or untrue, and so it is said to be indeterminable. It is called *Māyā*, according to Śankara, because it is not possible to define it in terms of known categories.⁴⁶

***Mokṣa* (Liberation while living)**

The highest human end is liberation, which must be distinguished from others such as wealth, pleasure and moral goodness, which are only instrumental values. Liberation is the release of the Self from the beginningless chain of *karma* (action) and from the cycle of transmigration. True liberation can only take place upon the physical death of one who has realized *Brahman*. This doctrine, called *videhamukti*, has been accepted by Śankara. He says, “If both good and evil deeds are said not to cling to the person who has realized *Brahman*, or are said

to be destroyed in their effects so far as he is concerned, it follows that he attains to *Mokṣa* as soon as his body falls.”⁴⁷ There is another understanding of liberation in Śankara which is liberation in embodied state (*jīvanmuktī*). Śankara describes the *jīvanmukta*'s body by comparing the latter to a lifeless slough, cast off and no longer connected to a snake.⁴⁸

Following the Upaniṣads, Advaita describes liberation as 'remaining in one's own Self' (*svātmanyavasthānam*), as 'remaining in one's own state' (*svarūpāvasthānam*). It is the Self that is the reality in the *jīva*; it is the Self that *constitutes* the essential nature of the *jīva*; and so to know the Self and be the Self is liberation. Since the Self is no other than *Brahman*, to 'attain' the Self through knowledge is to attain *Brahman*; consequently liberation is also referred to as 'the attainment *Brahman*' (*brahma-prāpti*). The point to be noted here is that, since the right knowledge of *Brahman/ātman*, which is spoken of in the tradition as *brahma-bodha* or *ātma-bodha*, can be attained here in this life itself through the discipline of *Śravaṇa-manana-nididhyāsana*, Advaita Advocates *jīvan-mukti*. Advaita holds that the Upaniṣadic texts such as 'Being *Brahman*, he goes to *Brahman*', support to the theory of liberation-in-life.

Śankara, further, explains the continued existence of the body after liberation by distinguishing three types of *karma*. The first two types, *sañcita* and *kriyamāna*, refer to action done in the past which has not yet borne fruit and action done in the present which is to bear fruit, respectively. These two types of *karma*, Śankara says, are completely destroyed by *Brahman*-knowledge.⁴⁹ The third type is called *prarabdha* and refers to action done in the past which has already begun to bear fruit through the formation and vitalization of the present body itself. And this type of *karma*, Śankara argues, cannot be stopped until death, "just

as an arrow which leaves the bow continues to move so long as its initial motion is not exhausted."⁵⁰ Just as a potter's wheel goes on revolving for some time even after the push is withdrawn; similarly the body may continue to exist even after knowledge has dawned, though all attachment with the body is cut off.⁵¹ However the fact remains that while the *prārabdha karma* continues to motivate bodily activity, the *jīvanmukta* remains completely detached from, and unaffected by, it. He thereby enjoys the eternal tranquility characteristic similar to the state of *Turiya*. One who attains liberation while living has realized the eternal bliss for which the devout Hindus pray:

*Asato mā sadgamaya, tamaso mā jyotirgamaya, mṛtyor mā
amṛtāgamaya.*

(Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, 1.3.28.)

From non-Being lead me to Being.
From darkness lead me to light.
From death lead me to immortality.

Liberation is not a post-mortem experience to be achieved in another world. It is the supreme felicity which is the eternal nature of the Self, and so one need not go elsewhere in search of it. As release is the eternal nature of the Self, one need not wait for realizing it till death overtakes the physical body. Even while tenanted a body, one is released at the onset of knowledge. The continuance of the body is in no way incompatible with the status of release. Taking *ātman* and *mukti* as synonyms, the Self is ever free. This truth is not realized because of the concealing power of *avidyā*. Śankara says: "Being *Brahman* is release ... Release is of the nature of *Brahman* which is eternal and pure."⁵² The Self, although always attained, is unattained, as it were, on account

of ignorance; when that (ignorance) is destroyed, it becomes manifest, as if attained, like the ornament round one's own neck.

Conclusion

To conclude, the goal of philosophy for Advaita Vedānta of Śankara is similar to the one expressed by Socrates and others, it is self-knowledge (*Brahma Vidyā*). It is a discovery of man and his essence as a complicated passionate being or a being whose nature is centered in a divine reality. This quest for self-knowledge is pervasive in Indian thought and is given a prominent place in Advaita Vedānta. I consider Advaita Vedānta to be the utmost expression of Hindu philosophical thinking. The 'truth' expressed by it is the ultimate one beyond which it is perhaps not possible to venture. It is a system which is bold in conception and uncompromising in its logic.

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