

Assignment 2

Evaluate the extent to which the major schools of Vedanta can be said to offer conflicting views of the self (atman) and the absolute (Brahman).

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INTRODUCTION

The question asked above is a complicated one for a number of reasons, some of which are: the Culture of the people to which I have no familiarity; the schools of Vedanta which comes under the religious and philosophical heading of Hinduism and which is one of the worlds largest and oldest religions and has a vast body of knowledge which has been extensively interpreted; and last but not least, the question can only be answered from my western perspective. Given these three controlling factors I believe the question at hand can still be answered with the aid of good reasoning critique and objectivity.

In order to both evaluate and answer the question I have decided to break the subject matter down into five areas or sub categories. This is to assist with the complex nature of the questions, as without these categories it would make it increasingly difficult to understand and philosophically critique the major Vedanta schools of thought in regards to the conflicting views of the Self (atman) and the absolute (Brahman). **Essential understanding of Hinduism**, in this section I will look at the basic historical context of Hinduism, which will take into account the geographical and cultural origins of Hinduism as well as the sacred texts of the Vedas also the Upanishads. It is not my intention to delve into any great detail in this area, as this is not the premise of this paper. **Brahman**; in this particular section I will look to give context to how Brahman is viewed with in the Vedas and the Upanishads. The **Atman** will also be looked at with in the context of the Vedas and the Upanishads of which there are many. The final section will look at the disagreements presented by the **Schools of Vedanta**. In this area I will give an overview of the major Vedanta schools of thought, although there are many schools which all have a different interpretations of the sacred text, I will concentrate on the ones which have different perspectives namely, None dualism, Qualified None dualistic school of thought and dualistic schools of thought in regards to Brahman, Atman and Maya. The objective of this section is to see if one can establish some sort of philosophical rationale to the opening question. Summary and conclusion will follow as a part of this thesis.

The question presented I believe is a universal and cross-cultural issue. From a western religious context we have Christianity (although Christianity has its origin in the east) which has numerous denominations, each of which have interpreted the Bible both Old Testament and New Testament to give particular conflicting schools of thought regarding God and the soul of man. These contentious interpretations presented in western philosophical and religious thought is not dissimilar to the ones presented in the major Vedanta and Upanishads; meaning different people or schools will always have conflicting view points even when interpreting the same text.

Essential understanding of Hinduism

The customs and traditions of the Hindu religious culture have their origin in the valley where the Indus River is located in the southern part of India. The indigenous people in the region at the time were the Mohenjo-daro, Harappan and Dravidian civilization. This was approximately around the 3rd Millennium. Approximately around 1500 BCE the nomadic Aryans from Persia arrived and the two cultures fused together to begin the spiritual development. The fusion is referred to as Hinduism, which comes from the Persian word Sindhu. In previous periods, some of the cultures in this region have come to identify and believe in what is called Sanatana Dharma ***the eternal and divine ordering of the cosmos as revealed in the Vedas, the sacred text of the Hindus***¹.

The sacred text is often split into two parts, Shruti (hearing) and Smriti (remembering). The oldest of these texts are the Vedas (knowledge), which are categorized into four areas: Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda. Additional texts within these Vedas are the Brahmanas (sacrificial rites) Aranyakas (esoteric rituals) and the Upanishads (concentrates on the self and self-relation to the cosmos). This relationship can be called the self and the absolute or more prominently Brahman (the universal soul) and Atman (the innermost self or soul). The Upanishads (meaning to sit) concentrate fundamentally on a number of philosophical questions such as what ***is the cause or Brahman? Why are we born? By what do we live? On what are we grounded? Are we to think of it as time, inherent nature, fate, chance, the elements, a womb, a person? Or a combination of these?***² This dialogue is taken from the Svatasvatara (the one whom owns a white mule) and it is for those who speak of Brahman. These fundamental questions are to help conceptualize the nature of Brahman. In fact the Upanishads as a religious and sacred text for Hinduism is essential to understanding the philosophical thought on Atman, Brahman, along with other aspects such as salvation through knowledge, karma, devotion and reincarnation. I think it is rational to say the Upanishads are a primary piece of work that is essential to understanding the ontology and various schools of thought in regards to conflicting ideology that Vedanta groups present. This shall be discussed later in this paper.

Brahman

This name, principle or concept of Brahman (ultimate reality or from the Sanskrit root meaning to grow, expand or increase) is one that needs to be understood from a philosophical standpoint. However this is quite difficult to conceptualize because of the varied descriptions. Generally it can be said that this Absolute is beyond human comprehension but can be described in essence as that which underpins or underlines and animates the whole of existence including all living things. In the largest and oldest Upanishads, Brihad Aranyakas Upanishads (The great and secret teachings of the forest) it tries to

¹ Eastern wisdom an illustrated guide to the religions and philosophy of the east p18. C Scott Littleton. General editor

² The Upanishads A complete guide edited by Signe Cohen p153

identify the unifying ontological mono aspect of the Universe. In this Upanishad the philosopher Gargi Vacaknavi and the sage Yajnavalkya have a dialogue as to the ultimate nature of the world, the very foundation of all existence. The question is asked, *"Since this whole world is woven back and forth on water, on what, then, is water woven back and forth?"* Yajnavalkya responds initially: *"On air, Gargi."*³ This answer was unsatisfactory so the discourse continued back and forth, very much along the same narrative, until when pressed to give an answer the sage Yajnavalkya calls Brahman as the highest reality. In the same Upanishad another conversation occurred between that of Vidagdha Shalala and the sage Yajnavalkya about the number of Gods in existence. The question is asked *"How many Gods are there"*⁴ the answer of *'three and three hundred, and three and three thousand'* is given initially. Again this answer is not agreeable and this narrative continues until ultimately the answer of one God is given and is identified as Brahman. The unifying principle of the absolute. From the above conversations we can see the principle descriptions have a consistent critique of Brahman being the absolute reality or existence. How this ultimate reality is perceived will be discussed later in the section about the three major Vedanta schools thought.

Atman

The Upanishads give various descriptions of the term Atman (the self). The Brihad Aranyaka Upanishads refer to the Atman as indefinable, ungraspable the life force, the unborn self, undecaying, the maker of everything etc. A fundamental teaching of the Upanishads is the close relationship of that of Brahman and Atman. Defining this relation can be both paradoxical and confusing to western thought as the terminology or attributes that are assigned to Atman are also given to Brahman. For example both are defined as *"the root of all existence"* or *"the very source of all life"*. Yet this paradoxical relation is the same but different, this is like the relation between "I" and "i", one in the same but different in the context used. The Hindu scholar Mr. Jay Lakani gives the example that Brahman is the universal expression, whilst Atman is the individual expression or manifestation. The creation is therefore Brahman and manifesting through our eyes is Atman. This concept is quite difficult to grasp yet it is a very subtle one, which I suspect for those whom study Hinduism have difficulty to conceptualize. Although this is a philosophy paper, from a scientific point of view when you were taught physics at school you learnt Einstein's famous equations of $E=mc^2$, which at a basic level says energy and mass are interchangeable, or energy is neither created or destroyed it just changes form. This being the case mass and energy are in a continuous state of flux. As an analogy, Brahman is energy (the universal expression) and mass is Atman (individual expression or the self). A further metaphor of Atman is that Brahman can be viewed, as the eternal sun and Atman are the rays from that sun.

³ Ten Theories of Human Nature, Third Edition Leslie Stevenson & David L Haberman p47

⁴ Ten Theories of Human Nature, Third Edition Leslie Stevenson & David L Haberman p47

Finally, if Brahman is viewed as the sea then Atman can be viewed as the splash or waves on that sea. This essential self should not be confused with the ego (Ahamkara), which is identified in the Upanishads as transitory over time and distinct from other selves. This self is the one which people usually recognize as them selves which is associated with the body and social and environment conditioning. This self is more in keeping with what the English philosopher David Hume comments on, that with self-introspection human beings ***are nothing but a bundle or collection of perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement... They are the successive perceptions only that constitute the mind.***⁵ In other words human beings are just a set of psychological continuations and there is no core (individual soul). This is in contrast to Hindu philosophy, this ego self is not the ultimate self nor is it the true identity of the individual person. The essential and true self is Atman. The ego self cloaks the true self and hence the human conditions of finding true identity.

How the principle of both Brahman and Atman are understood and perceived in the philosophical context of Hinduism are dependent on the school of thought, which have interpreted the Upanishads. To be clearer, how both the religious and philosophical body of Hinduism is viewed will be dependent on the lens one looks through. These lenses will colour both understanding and perception. The lenses of interpretations are the:

Schools of Vedanta

Vedanta (end of the Vedas) can be broken to down into two main categories: ***Karmakanda spiritual exegesis (consisting of the samhitas and the Brahmins) and janakanda a section of knowledge (consisting of the Upanishads and to a certain extent, the Aranyakas)***⁶. The first section deals with rituals and the latter section deals with liberating knowledge to end the cycle of death and rebirth. The Vedanta schools are further separated into three major schools of thought, each advocating a divergent philosophical doctrine of the critique on the Upanishads. These components fall into the following categories:

1. Advaita Vedanta (non-dualism)
2. Visistadvaita Vedanta (Qualified non-dualism)
3. Dvaita Vedanta (Dualism)

Although each of the above philosophical schools advocated differences on their critique of the Upanishads, they still share a commonality in regards to Shabda, or Śabda (Sanskrit word for "speech sound") in regards to epistemology, Upanishads, the Brahma sutra and Bhagavad Gita as principal or fundamental text. Interpretations of the Upanishads, particularly that of the Aranyakas has

⁵ David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, Book I, part iv, sec vi

⁶ History of Indian philosophy edited by Purushottama Bilimoria with Amy Rayner p194

led to philosophical dichotomies, particularly in the understanding of Brahman being that of the absolute ultimate reality, underpinning reality and the opposite philosophical thought which focuses on a personal relations with the absolute reality Brahman. These two divergent schools of thought have resulted in varied practices and rituals within the context of Hinduism.

Advaita Vedanta

The main exponent of Advaita Vedanta (non-dualism) Philosophical School of thought was that of the philosopher Shankara, who lived approximately between 788 - 820 AD. He was a very popular philosopher in India, but was also known with in the western world. This could be because of his monotheistic theology to Hinduism, which has a similarity to that of some exponents of the Christian doctrine. Fundamental questions such as what is or who is Brahman? What is it, to know the absolute reality? What is the relationship of the personal soul to that of Brahman? And what is the relationship between that of the absolute and the world (which we interact with using our senses). Shankara answered these questions by reasoning that Brahman was both object and subject, Atman is Brahman and Brahman is identifiable with Atman, so there are no differences. This is monism where everything is one. The ultimate self and the inner most self is that of the absolute truth, which is Brahman. There is no duality, if one subscribes to this ontological reasoning then a critical question arises. What is this world of multiple shapes and form? If Brahman is the underpinning reality. Shankaras highest realization of Brahman as the absolute reality concluded that this world of differentiation is ultimately not real or is a significant conceptual philosophy of Maya (illusion). This delusion is the means by which the world of shape and form (differentiation) comes into being. To be clear the form comes into being via the forces of the formless. But ultimately this is due to our spiritual ignorance, which is caused, by this Maya, which obscures and cloaks the absolute reality, underpinning existence of Brahman. To eradicate this illusion one has to obtain the fundamental knowledge. Shankara is not advocating that the world of multiple forms and that which we perceive with our sense is not real or is just our imagination. It is more like a person who has poor eye sight (ignorance) looking at a object or person. At first they cannot distinguish the object or person and this may result in the feeling of confusion or even anxiety. The feelings are real enough existentially however, it is only when the spectacles with the correct lenses (ultimate knowledge that all is Brahman) are put on that the object or person can be seen in the true light and then all becomes clear. Staying with this analogy of sight, if a person with cataracts (ignorance) has them removed with a surgical knife (ultimate knowledge) then he or she will see the world clearer. Shankara views the Atman as the true self, as pure eternal consciousness. However, when the veil of ignorance (illusion, Maya) is eradicated this individual soul Atman is no other than Brahman the eternal self.

Visistadvaita Vedanta

In contention to Advaita Vedanta is Visistadvaita Vedanta (Qualified non-dualism). The main advocate of this particular philosophical school of thought was Ramanuja whom was both an interpreter and theologian of the sacred text. His interpretation of particular aspects of the Upanishads was diametrically opposed to that which Shankara proposed. He reasoned that ***Atman was not identical to the absolute reality of Brahman***⁷. The absolute is a whole made up of composite parts of which both animate and inanimate things are a part of this divine body. This philosophical critique presented a major split in the Vedanta schools. In fact he reasoned that Brahman means God and is still the only reality however now takes on brilliant attributes that are limitless, which is a form of pluralism. These attributes are differentiated objects. This interpretation represents a significant shift from Shankara whom advocated Brahman to be pure undifferentiated consciousness. Ramanuja also contends the concept of Brahman being pure undifferentiated consciousness because knowledge is dependent on differentiation of objects. To clarify this is polarity, meaning in order to understand what is up one needs to understand what is down or what is cold and what is hot, both these metaphors are based on perception and understanding. However both opposites are necessary in order to comprehend knowledge. From a western mindset, how does one know God without knowledge of the Devil? This conceptual understanding by Ramanuja of Brahman is still liberating knowledge however; the world of form and shape (Maya) is necessary and real. In fact this is the creative activity or power of Brahman and the desire to become multiple. Experience of this world of multiplicity is a means by which one obtains liberating knowledge, but the role of Bhakti (devotion) with a personal relationship with God also means liberation. This is in contrast to Shankara Advaita Vedanta conceptual interpretation of Maya as an illusion, which is to be overcome and devotion via Vishnu was a lower form of understanding. Ramanuja interpretation of Maya is the creative aspect or power of God (Brahman). With the Ramanuja school of thought, how then is the soul to be viewed or conceptualized? The soul is part of the conceptual body of Brahman and is therefore both different and none differentiated, or is both object and subject. Ramanuja maintains the soul is eternal as it is part of the conceptual body of Brahman (God). Atman is an aspect of Brahman, distinct in that Atman is like the spark, distinct from the fire. Ultimately the individual soul is a participant in the ultimate reality. Without God the individual self could not exist. This is in contrast to that of Shankara who hypothesizes that individual soul is false illusion and Brahman is the only true self and reality. This qualified position Ramanuja is more of a medium between the two schools of thought and has some similarity to that of western Christian theology where God is both father and son.

Dvaita Vedanta

One of the main advocates for Dvaita Vedanta (Dualism) school of thought was Madhva who lived around 1200 CE. This school of thought is very candid in its conceptual interpretation of the sacred text in regards to both Brahman and Atman. As a theologian he reasoned that the sacred text of the Upanishads when

⁷ Routledge History of Indian philosophy 194

speaking of Brahman and Atman were dualistic. This being the case the individual self is different from the lord, in fact the self is not an aspect or attribute of God, which is in contrast to Ramanuja construct of parts making up the whole. Madhva conceptualize differences in all aspect of existence; the universe is different from the earth and earth is different from animated and inanimate objects or things. All things have unique differences of which Madhva puts into five categories: ***between the lord and the self: (Jivatman) between innumerable selves; between the lord and matter (Prakrti); between the self and matter; and between phenomena with in matter***⁸. This is in contrast to both Advaita Vedanta and Visistadvaita Vedanta although this is differentiation, which is similar to Ramanuja aspects contributing to the whole; Madhva goes further to reason things are different (pluralism), independent, unique and distinct nothing exists outside the will of Brahman. The soul retains its individuality when liberated. This again is in direct contrast to the philosophy and theology of both Ramanuja and Shankara. The latter of these two interpreters maintains that there is nothing but Brahman and Ramanuja school of thought, reasons that the soul is but an aspect of the absolute. Liberation is a combination of ***devotions (bhakti) and divine favor (Prasada)***⁹, like the Christian traditions where Christ saves, Vishnu saves in this instance along with understanding the five categories above. God is both the creator and sustainer of the material principles and he is the governor of it all. This is in direct contrast to that of Ramanuja and Shankara school of thought where Brahman is the only true reality. Liberation from Maya can only be obtained by knowledge, which eradicates ignorance, and Ramanuja where liberation is obtained via devotion.

Summary

From the evaluation of the major schools of Vedanta it has been established that there are primarily three major schools of Vedanta. One of the reasons for this split is because each one of these schools presents a different interpretation on the sacred text of the Vedas particularly on the Upanishads, which concentrates on the self and self-relation to the cosmos or put simply Brahman and Atman. The three schools are categorized as: Advaita Vedanta (non-dualism), Visistadvaita Vedanta (Qualified non-dualism) and Dvaita Vedanta (Dualism). Centre to this primary discord is the conceptualization, epistemological and ontological understanding of the conflicting views of the self (Atman) and the absolute (Brahman). The main advocate for the Advaita Vedanta (non-dualism) school of thought was Shankara whom reasoned that both Brahman and Atman are 'one the absolute' and reality. This is monism, everything is one. Both the ultimate self and innermost self is that of the absolute truth, Brahman. Spiritual ignorance presents the conceptual world as multiplicity, Maya (illusion). Liberation from this ignorance can only be obtained via ultimate knowledge of Brahman. A criticism of this exegesis is that it could be perceived that Atman and

⁸ An introduction to Hinduism. Gavin Flood p259

⁹ An Introduction to Indian Philosophy. Bartley p250

Brahman are spiritual ignorance itself, because Shankara reasons that Brahman is the only reality. This criticism may be deposed by reasoning that this veil of ignorance on the innermost self is more alike to memory loss and one just needs the right knowledge to remember who you really are, Brahman. The opposing school of thought to Shankara is that of Ramanuja Visistadvaita Vedanta (Qualified non-dualism). He reasoned that the conceptual principle of Brahman was not identical to that of Atman. He reasoned that the whole (Brahman) was made up of multiple parts of which both animate and inanimate things are a part of this divine body; and this divine conceptual body was that of Brahman. Liberation from Maya was obtainable via knowledge and Bhakti. This particular understanding is very popular in both the west and the east. The final of the three major schools of thought is Dvaita Vedanta (Dualism). Madhva reasoned that Brahman was different from Atman, in fact unique differences were in all aspects of existence. The Lord is he whom governs all creations and is to be worshiped, liberations is via devotion and the lords grace.

Conclusion

The three major schools of Vedanta all present a different philosophical and religious interpretation of the Upanishads particularly in regards to Brahman and Atman, this in turn has produced conflicting ideology. Different philosophical and religious understanding of sacred text is not just confined to Hinduism. In fact if you look at the worlds three major religious of Christianity, Islam and Hinduism all have conflicting understanding of their religious text. This has produced different schools of thought and splits within the religion. In Christianity you have Catholics, Protestants and other groups. In Islam you have Sunni, Shia and more. The conflicting views have caused not only philosophical conflict but also physical. This separation is the same that is found in Hinduism. Why the different interpretations is a question that I find interesting. In Hinduism you find the three major advocates of the Vedanta schools are all born at a different period of time and are subject to different education, communities and variants of the Hindu culture. This factor has contributed to the individuals (Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva) social and environment conditioning, which has formed their perception. This in turn has contributed to the different interpretation of the Upanishads or sacred text. As a metaphor this is similar to an elephant in a room: Three blind sages embrace a different aspect of the elephant (Upanishad or Brahman), perceiving this to be the only truth, not realizing that there is more to the truth than just their critique.

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