

10

Vedānta

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The interpretation of the Upaniṣads

The word 'Vedānta' literally means 'the end of the Vedas', where end means the Upaniṣads. Vedānta is the systematic interpretation of the Upaniṣads (collectively termed '*śruti*' or 'what has been *heard*') either by direct commentary upon them or by elaborate explanations of the aphoristic summaries of their contents in the *Brahma-Sūtras*. The *Bhagavad Gītā* is also a key authority. With the Epics (the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*) and *Purāṇas*, the *Gītā* is included in the category of traditional authorities called *smṛti* or 'what has been remembered'. The latter has the function of elucidating and corroborating *śruti*.

There are three antagonistic traditions of thought: *Advaita Vedānta*, which is a metaphysical monism saying that fundamentally reality is featureless and tranquil consciousness; *Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta*, which proclaims the unity of a complex reality; and *Dvaita Vedānta*, which combines strict monotheism and a realistic metaphysical pluralism.

They all agree that eternal scriptures called *śruti* or ‘what has been heard’ are the sole means of knowing (*pramāṇa*) about what is beyond the scope of sensory perception and inference. Vedāntins hold that it is the Upaniṣads, the ‘knowledge portion’ (*jñāna-kāṇḍa*) of the *Vedas* that reveal the truths that we need to know about the absolute Being (the *brahman*), the soul (*ātman*) and the relation between the two, the origin of the universe from the *brahman*, the consequentiality of actions (*karma*), transmigration (*saṃsāra*) as well as the means to and nature of ultimate liberation from rebirth (*mokṣa/mukti*).

All Vedāntins will agree with the grammarian Bhartṛhari’s observation that even if something is inferred by clever logicians with a big effort, there will always be cleverer ones who come up with another explanation [*Vākyapadīya* 1.42]. As Rāmānuja puts it: ‘A theory that rests exclusively on human concepts may at some other time or place be refuted by arguments devised by cleverer people.... The conclusion is that with regard to supernatural matters, Scripture alone is the epistemic authority and that reasoning is to be used only in support of Scripture’ [*Śrī Bhāṣya* 2.1.12].

Vedāntins aim to construct a systematic and coherent interpretation of the Upaniṣads, in accordance with a principle that they form a single body of literature with a unified overall purport (*tātparya*). The Vedāntins follow common exegetical norms and techniques in order to identify specific coherent contexts of meaning (*eka-vākyatā*) and then demonstrate that these contexts themselves fit together. As far as possible, the exegete must construe the texts in their literal senses. The principal Upaniṣads were probably composed over a very long period of time (roughly 800 B.C. to 300 B.C.) and long before the first extant Vedāntic systematizations (c. 700 A.D.). Their contents are diverse. They do not obviously teach a single coherent message. Moreover, they are often obscure. The abbreviated summaries of the topics of which they treat (the *Brahma-Sūtras*) are frequently ambiguous. So there was ample scope for very different interpretations, and that is exactly what we find.

Whereas the theorists of ritual performance (*Pūrva-Mīmāṃsakas*) were concerned with and insisted upon the primary meaningfulness of Vedic action-commands (*vidhi*) bearing on ritual performance, Vedāntins focus upon the fact-asserting or descriptive texts (*arthavāda*) referring to already existent entities or states of affairs, rather than ‘things to be done’ (*kārya*). Both earlier and later Mīmāṃsā developed sophisticated techniques of textual exegesis and argued about whether ritual performance can be a path to salvation with or without intuitive insight into the true

nature of reality (*jñāna*), devotion to God (*bhakti*) and divine grace (*prasāda*).

Most Vedāntins accept versions of the Sāṃkhya theory of *satkāryavāda* and say that effects are emanations that do not differ essentially from their underlying or substrative causes. It follows that there is some form of ontological nexus or parallelism of being (an *analogia entis*) between the world and the *brahman* that is its cause. *Madhva* is an exception here in that he denies that there is a real continuity of being between God and the world. He maintains (like the Śaiva Siddhāntins by whose outlook the Dvaita tradition is influenced) that God produces the cosmos out of eternally real Prime Matter that is distinct from him.

The Bhedābheda tradition of Upaniṣadic interpretation

Before turning to a consideration of some of the major representatives of the different Vedāntic schools, we will mention a tradition of theological thinking that is labelled ‘Bhedābheda’, meaning ‘difference and no-difference’. The idea here is that the Supreme Being has two modes of existence: an unconditioned mode that is the *brahman* as it is in itself wherein all differentia have been suppressed, and a conditioned mode that is the emanated cosmos. The cosmos is understood as the real self-differentiation of the One, the substrative cause of all finite existences. The cosmos emerges out of the absolute Being. Freedom from rebirth is achievable through a combination of works and knowledge. It is the soul’s dissolution into the foundational reality.¹

We have here an attempt to hold together the transcendent unity of divinity and the reality of the plural world. (A version of this cosmography is to be found in Ādiśeṣa’s *Paramārthasāra*.)

Rāmānuja radically modifies this outlook, but as a pupil of Yādavaprakāśa, he is a reliable source of information:

Bhāskara and his followers say on the basis of the scriptures expressing unity that the Brahman although having every excellent quality such as freedom from evil is conditioned by a limiting condition (*upādhi*) and is bound and released, and is the substrate of transformations (*pariṇāma*) that are various imperfections. [*Vedārthasaṃgraha* para. 8]

Because Bhāskara and his followers do not accept any realities other than the Brahman and the limiting conditions, given the association between the Brahman and the limiting conditions all the defects proper to the latter will apply to the Brahman itself. [*Vedārthasaṃgraha* para. 54]

Yādavaprakāśa and his followers, explaining the exact meaning of the scriptures about unity say that the Brahman, an ocean of unsurpassable and immeasurable noble qualities proper to its nature, is by nature both distinct and not distinct from sentient beings, and the abode of many kinds of impure transformations. [*Vedārthasaṃgraha* para. 9]

Given their assumption that the individual soul and the Brahman are both different and non-different, it follows that if the Brahman is essentially the same as the individual souls, all the defects belonging to them will belong to it also. If God is essentially constitutive of all the different creatures, then he is the nature of each and every one. Such being the case, all their pleasures and pains will belong to him. [*Vedārthasaṃgraha* para. 58]

In the course of his explication of *Brahma-Sūtra* 2.1.15, he attributes to these thinkers the view that the *brahman* is the primary cause – an entity that is undifferentiated Being possessed of every potentiality. Prior to the emanation of the cosmos it is self-luminous consciousness that is distinct from the insentient and in which all experiences, pleasant and painful, are stilled. But during the cosmic emanation, it exists in tripartite mode as experiencers, objects of experience and the controller. Because of the continuity between cause and effects and the non-difference between the *brahman* and the cosmos, all the good and bad features of the produced cosmos affect the *brahman*.

Proto-Vedānta from a Buddhist perspective: The description of Vedānta in Bhāviveka's *Madhyamakahrdaya*

- 1 How is freedom [from rebirth] possible for those who say that there are no permanent identities, and that all conditioned entities are empty of intrinsic nature?

- 2 After contemplating the transcendent principle (*puruṣa*) beyond the darkness and radiant like the sun – the Maheśvara (Śiva) – a wise man survives death.
- 3 When seeing the golden one, he will see that God is the creator. Putting aside merit and demerit, he will attain equality (with Śiva).
- 4 All things past, present and future are included in the *puruṣa*.

He is within, without, near and far. As such he is the agent, the maker of all.

- 5 All entities are produced from him, like threads from a spider. Wise men are dissolved in him and do not enter upon another existence.
- 6 What is mortal cannot become immortal. Hence immortality is impossible unless one has awakened to the immortal *puruṣa*.
- 7 The cosmos is rolled out by the one first principle which is the unsurpassably great being.
- 9 In that *puruṣa* (causal substrate and principle), all elements come into being. For the one who sees that reality, there is equality between learned and ignorant, between Brahmin and outcaste.
- 10 When a pot is produced or destroyed, the space it contains does not acquire those characteristics. Bodies are subject to birth and death, but souls are exempt from those processes.
- 11 If you say that the one is diversified if it is like the space in pots, the reply is that the space is not differentiated: although the pots are different individuals, the one space is the same for all.
- 12 Although the pots be different, the clay is the same.
- 13 Just as a single space contained by a pot becomes polluted by dust and smoke without that applying to space as a whole, so people have different experiences.
- 14 It is because he is unawakened that the one who does not know the soul collects *karma* and enjoys the welcome and unwelcome consequences – like the misconception during dreaming that the experiences are genuine.
- 15 Although embodied he is not sullied when he enjoys experiences as long as he is not attached. Like a king taking his pleasure, he is innocent of wrong-doing.

- 16 When a self-controlled yogin knows the *brahman* as one, omnipresent, eternal, transcendent and imperishable, he is not reborn.
- 17 It is eternal and beyond concepts, but words are applied to it by those whose minds are beguiled by differences.

Further reading

Nakamura (1983).

Note

1. v. Oberhammer (1997).

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