

Advaita Vedānta

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Liberating gnosis and disengagement from the world

Śaṅkara, who with his contemporary Maṇḍana Miśra was one of the founding fathers of Advaita Vedānta, probably lived around 700 A.D. His major work is a commentary on the *Brahma-Sūtras*. He also wrote commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gītā* and on individual Upaniṣads. Among the many other works attributed to him by the Advaita tradition, the 'Thousand Teachings' or *Upadeśa-Sāhasrī* stands out. His vision is that of the radical renouncer, which ultimately calls into question the values

of mainstream orthodoxy by denying that there are any real individual thinkers, agents and acts.¹

There is no question that Śaṅkara was an original genius, but it should be mentioned that the Advaitic tradition traces itself back to Gauḍapāda who probably lived around 450–500 A.D. and wrote the *Āgama-śāstra* about the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*. He likened the phenomenology of normal experience to that of dreaming and claimed that in both cases it is only the fact of consciousness that remains constant. Individual entities (*bhāva*) are mental constructs (*kalpanā*). The one Supreme Soul, the waveless absolute, imagines itself as conscious individuals.²

Gauḍapāda's contemporary, the grammarian Bhartṛhari, taught the 'non-dualism of meaning' (*śabda-advaita*). The idea is that the diversified phenomenal cosmos ('the proliferation of names and forms') is the emanation from a unitary sonic Absolute not of things but of meanings. It is the appearance of the transcendent 'meaning-reality' (*śabda-tattva*), otherwise known as the *brahman*. The absolute Being appears to transform itself through its innate powers into meanings, words and sentences. Words and what they mean are identical. The differentiated world of our experience is a product of diversification by language. Reality is a matrix of differentiated meanings rather than things or objects. Ignorance (*avidyā*), our default position as it were, is a function of linguistic proliferation into individual words and propositions. It consists in understanding the world in terms of the individual entities that are the referents of words and resting content at that level. Bhartṛhari's linguistic idealism exercised a considerable influence on Maṇḍana Miśra as well as on the monistic Śaiva traditions.³

Advaita means non-dualism or monism. Monism is the doctrine that reality is of only one kind. According to Advaita, the unconditioned reality (the *brahman*) is the coincidence of being, consciousness and bliss (*saccidānanda*). Central to Śaṅkara's position are the distinctions between being and becoming, and between gnosis and ignorance. Authentic reality that is eternal, uniform and unchanging is contrasted with the change, agency and multiplicity that characterizes everyday experience.

Vedānta is the systematic exegesis of the Upaniṣads, those parts of the infallible and authorless Vedic Scriptures (*śruti*), which according to orthodox Vedic Brahmins are the sole means of knowing (*pramāṇa*) about anything beyond sense-perception and inference. In short, the Scriptures are the only way of knowing about the *brahman*, soul (*ātman*) and the way

to release from rebirth. The founders of the different Vedāntic schools understood themselves as interpreters of the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and as expositors of the epitomes of the Upaniṣadic teachings called the *Brahma-Sūtras*.⁴

Advaitins say that the essential teaching of the Upaniṣads is that our experience of a differentiated world of conscious and non-conscious individual entities is really a gigantic misconception superimposed upon the undifferentiated and inactive *brahman* or Pure Being. That foundational reality is nothing other than the coincidence of Being and tranquil consciousness. Liberation is just the cessation of the ignorance or misconception (*avidyā*) that is responsible for our experiencing reality as fragmented and our misunderstanding ourselves as individual experiencers and agents. While religious activities, ritual and meditative, purify the mind and distract us from selfish pursuits, they cannot produce enlightenment and liberation from rebirth *directly*.

For Advaitins, the focal teaching of the Upaniṣads is that one's true nature (*ātman*) is the same as undifferentiated pure being (the *brahman*), understood as tranquil consciousness undisturbed by differences. But reality and truth are obscured by ignorance: an ignorance that generates the illusions of individuality and differentiation. Individual entities are constructs, limiting conditions (*upādhi*) superimposed upon the foundational conscious reality. Liberation (*mokṣa*) from rebirth (*saṃsāra*) means an intuitive realization of the coincidence of featureless being and tranquil consciousness. Liberation is just the elimination of mistaken thinking in terms of differentiation and the immediate realization that one's true nature is nothing other than tranquil, transcendental consciousness. Advaita is a gnostic tradition: intuitive knowledge will set you free from bondage to a cosmos that is a function of beginningless ignorance. It is the repudiation of religion as a set of beliefs and practices, and as a path to a goal that can be attained by means of rituals or devotion to deities.

At the beginning of his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Śaṅkara gives mythic voice to an opposition that has been thought by some to be the key to understanding Indian religion.⁵ That opposition is manifested in the dialogue between 'the man in the world' who gains merit by following the public Vedic religion (*dharma*) of ritual acts and social duties, and the renouncer who has disengaged himself from religious practices and social involvement in order to pursue his own salvation through gnosis (*jñāna*).

The Lord produced the cosmos, and desiring to establish its perpetuation, he first created the Lords of Creatures and gave them the active path of social

and religious duties (*pravṛtti-dharma*) that is sanctioned by the Vedas. Then he made others, and gave them the path consisting in the renunciation of ritual acts and social duties (*nivṛtti-dharma*) that is characterised by *gnosis* and dispassion.... The aim of the teaching of the Gītā is the Supreme Good, understood as the final cessation of rebirth and its causes. The Supreme Good arises from commitment to intuiting one's true nature (*ātma jñāna*), preceded by the renunciation (*saṁnyāsa*) of all ritual acts and social duties. The religion of activity is prescribed for members of castes and stages of life who are intent on prosperity and it may be the cause of the attainment of the world of the gods. When practiced in an attitude of devotion to a personal godhead, without any interest in the benefits of ritual acts, it produces purity of mind. The pure minded person approaches the efficient cause of the attainment of the Supreme Good – that cause being the onset of *gnosis* expressed in the enlightened mode of living.⁶

Śaṅkara was one of those who followed the way of renunciation of ritual and social engagement. This is the tradition of those who deny that extroverted religious activity can of itself deliver liberation from rebirth. Enlightenment arises from intuitive insight unmediated by thoughts and words, into the identity of one's inner nature (*pratyag-ātman*) and the *brahman*. This is the mystical realization of the equation of Being and Consciousness. It is the manifestation of what one always and already is. While insight obliterates all experience of differentiation and individuality, vestiges of such experience persist in the life of the enlightened one, who is 'liberated while alive' (*jīvan-mukta*) until his release at death.⁷ One response on the part of the man who has seen the light is the renunciation of all ritual acts as well as all everyday responsibilities and obligations. Śaṅkara's radical vision is that of the world renouncer (*saṁnyāsin*) who rejects the view that liberation is the fruit of a combination of actions and gnosis. His contemporary Maṇḍana Miśra is more concerned with integrating liberating gnosis into the everyday life of the householder. He recognizes that renouncing social ties and the shared religion is not an easy option. He says that the Vedic rituals purify the mind and prepare the way for realization of one's true identity as the *brahman*. Understanding of that identity, conveyed by scripture, is intensified by ritual and contemplation that counteract the still forceful traces of the pluralistic mentality. He recommended the repetitive type of meditation called *prasaṁkhyāna* as a means of removing moral defects and hindrances (*kleśa*) and as a way of internalizing the Upaniṣadic statements conveying non-duality.

One of Śaṅkara's primary concerns is the justification of the path of detachment and inactivity in the face of mainstream Brahminical orthodoxy,

which holds that it is the ritual actions of select human agents that keep the cosmos going. But Śaṅkara was also a mystic. The meditator absorbed in profound contemplation and isolated from the world of experience has neither thoughts nor feelings. There is just motionless, undifferentiated awareness that does not seek to accomplish any purposes. This is the state that Advaitins call ‘pure consciousness’ or ‘mere knowing’. It knows no fluctuations and is neither directed towards nor about objects. It is not consciousness *of* anything, and it has no specific content. It is blissful, for it lacks nothing. There is no sense of selfhood or personal individuality: there is merely *being conscious*. This is the authentic reality, the *brahman*, the coincidence of being and blissful consciousness. It is on this non-discursive experience that Advaita is founded. This is the experience that is meant by Upaniṣadic statements such as ‘*tat tvam asi*’ and ‘I am the *brahman*’, which Advaitins interpret as asserting the identity of the *brahman* and the *ātman*.⁸ When the practitioner emerges from the state of absorption, the world around him with all its frustrations, its changes and chances, means and ends, seems thin, frustrating and unsubstantial. The Advaitin rejection of the categories of differentiation, relation, change and individual substance can be seen as flowing from a serene and self-authenticating contemplative experience in which one’s sense of personal individuality and agency are obliterated. The construction of personhood and our sense thereof (*ahaṃkāra* – lit. ‘I-maker’) as well as our engagement with a diversified material world are attributed to the work of beginningless ignorance (*avidyā*). Broadly speaking, ignorance can either mean simply not knowing something or other, or it can mean being mistaken. The latter sense includes not just everyday mistakes about this and that but also fundamental misconceptions about the nature of the world, and of oneself. It is that sense with which the tradition is concerned. Encouraged by the tradition’s use of metaphors comparing everyday experience to a mirage, to things seen in dreams, to a rope mistaken for a snake or mother of pearl taken for silver, there is a tendency to Advaita as ‘illusionism’. But this is to take the metaphors literally. The description, however, is apt if it is understood as meaning that nothing in the world that we inhabit and know *really matters* since all unenlightened experience is conditioned by innate misunderstanding. The extent to which the vision is subversive of mainstream Brahminical orthodoxy must be emphasized. It follows from Advaitin premises that the beliefs that life is *saṃsāra* subject to *karma*, that the Vedas can point us to the summum bonum, and that caste distinctions are important are all mistaken.

Why do we encounter a diverse cosmos? Why do we think that we are individual embodied conscious agents? In the first part of his *Upadeśa-Sāhasrī*, Śaṅkara says that the *brahman*, unchanging in itself, activates a non-conscious world-creative principle that depends upon it. This primary substrative cause is called ‘undeveloped name and form’ (*nāma-rūpa*), and it is inexpressible (*anirvacanīya*) as this or that, as one thing or another. This is because entities have not yet been actualized, and there is nothing that could be identified. In the subsequent tradition, this idea will be reformulated as ‘inexpressible as being or not-being’ and will be taken in a variety of ways to mean that the world and its cause is ontologically indeterminable. Later writers will say that *avidyā* means the causal principle of the cosmos. When Śaṅkara describes ‘name and form’ as ‘having the nature of *avidyā*’ he just means that it is other than consciousness. From the substrative cause emanate the basic elements constituting the differentiated cosmos – where things with determinate identities can be called ‘this’ or ‘that’. Śaṅkara holds that the products (*vikāra*) of the primordial causal substrate are less than fully real (*anṛta*). In other words, they are not the authentic reality or the ‘genuine article.’⁹ Whatever the sense in which the cosmos proceeds from its source, the source is unchanged. The *brahman* cannot change. If it did, it could not be a fully accomplished or perfect reality because it would always be becoming something else, becoming what it was not.

Inexplicably, there is the universal delusion, present prior to any possible experience of the world, that the one true purely conscious nature (*ātman* identical with the *brahman*) is divided into individual centres of consciousness, attached to bodies and social status, and actively engaged with an objective and differentiated world. As such, we misunderstand ourselves as different from the *brahman* and in our innate ignorance (*avidyā*) are subject to transmigration and all our woe. Śaṅkara is not really interested in questions about the ontological status of *avidyā*. To the question, ‘to whom does it belong?’, he replies, ‘you, the questioner who does not know’. All our everyday secular and religious transactions (*vyavahāra*) that involve thinking in terms of individual subjects, objects and relations, agents, actions and results are infected by error. It follows that ritual and salvific gnosis are incompatible. Belief in the efficacy of ritual presupposes that an event (*kriyā*), the multiple factors (*kāraka*) of agency and action of which it is comprised, and its result are independent entities connected by relations. But gnosis concerns only the featureless absolute consciousness, knowledge of which reveals that the plurality of factors implicit in ritual action is the work of *avidyā*.

In the introduction to his *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya*, Śaṅkara defines the existential ignorance (*avidyā*) that is natural to the human condition as ‘mutual superimposition’ (*itaretara-adhyāsa*). He basically means by this the misattribution of the properties of one thing to something else, typified by false memories. More elaborately, it is the superimposition of the purely conscious internal sphere onto what is objective, insentient and mutable, and the reverse superimposition of the objective sphere onto consciousness, the inner identity and the detached witness of all experiences. Mutual superimposition is the misconception that one’s true nature (*ātman*) is other than it is. This happens when the reflection of the radiant light of consciousness is captured in the mind (*buddhi*), which is both material and active. The mind assumes the character of consciousness, as a crystal assumes the colour of a proximal object, and the per se unchanging consciousness appears to become active. The basic case of mutual superimposition is self-understanding as an individual centre of consciousness and agency (*ahaṁkāra*), and self-misidentification as an embodied person having a caste status. Furthermore, there is the misconception that the accumulation of merit and demerit through the performance of intentional actions really influences one’s true nature. The superimposition of the subjective on the objective occurs when we attribute consciousness to the activities of the material mental apparatus. This beginningless and endless innate practice of superimposition, whose nature is misconception, causes agency and enjoyment of finite experiences. It is the precondition of all secular and religious activities, of all behaviour (*vyavahāra*) involving means of knowing (*pramāṇa*) and knowable objects, and of all the Scriptures whether concerned with ritual injunctions or even liberation from rebirth. In everyday life (*vyavahārika*) where what are ultimately false beliefs are current, the world is treated as differentiated, and the distinctions between knowers and what is knowable, experiences and what is experienced, agents, actions and outcomes are taken for granted. Given that Scripture is recognized as *pramāṇa* and if the *pramāṇas* belong to the arena of *avidyā*, how can it convey knowledge about the *brahman*? The answer is that the existence of the *brahman*, a state of pure knowing (*jñapti-mātra*), is self-revealing and self-established and thus needs no *pramāṇa*. In any case, the *pramāṇas* yield intellectual ‘knowledge that’ rather than the liberating experience that transforms one’s view of reality and one’s way of living. The purpose of scriptural exegesis is primarily to demonstrate that Advaita does not conflict with the *śrutis*. It is not to be expected, however, that Śaṅkara seriously entertained the possibility that the liberating awareness, that is unmediated experience of the *brahman*,

could happen for one who was not familiar with the Advaita-*śrutis*. His position seems to have been that the liberating awareness happens to one who has reflected upon and internalized certain *śrutis* and whose mentality has been purified thereby. In short, scripture prepares the ground for liberating experience, although it does not bring it about.

The intuition of one's true nature or identity (*ātman*) *happens to* one who had formerly mistakenly understood himself as a centre of experience and agency, one whose mental life is a stream of ever-changing perceptions of and affective responses to external objects and who had deemed himself subject to caste-duties and ritual obligations. The intuition reveals that one's everyday sense of individual personality (*ahaṁkāra*) as the centre of that arena conceals our true nature as tranquil, objectless consciousness. It reveals that one is not essentially an individual agent of actions. The existential transformation occurs simultaneously with the non-discursive awareness, 'I am the *brahman*'. This knowledge obliterates *karma* and prevents the accumulation of fresh *karma*. Such is the condition of one who is liberated while still alive (*jīvan-mukta*), one who is the witness of rather than a participant in the stream of mental events and mundane transactions. The *brahman*'s being the true nature of beings who wrongly believe themselves to be individual agents is an already established fact. Knowledge of the *brahman*, like all knowledge, depends upon something already given as a reality. Liberation is not an achievement. It is not something that is brought about by religious strivings. It is simply the removal of an unenlightened mentality and thus does not require, indeed is antithetical to, anything that might be regarded as religious praxis since the latter presupposes mistaken belief in the reality of differentiation, of means and ends. Gnostic insight destroys error and reveals the truth that one is nothing other than permanently unchanging and non-intentional or 'pure' consciousness. The permanent background consciousness, one's true nature, both establishes its own existence and is always revealed as the unchanging witness of changing mental states. Everything other than consciousness needs consciousness for its revelation or manifestation by the means of knowledge. But consciousness is unique in that it needs nothing outside itself. It is simply given and undeniable, for only consciousness can deny anything. It is not subject to temporal limitations, for it may have a perspective on past, present and future all at once and is thus eternal. It is not limited by external objects, for it can imagine that things are other than they are. Once the scriptural teaching that the *brahman* is one's true nature is internalized, the misconception that there

are individual selves with their own identities no longer operates. On that constitutive misconception was founded the belief that the entire matrix of worldly life (*vyavahāra*) has its own self-sufficient reality. With the removal of the primary misconception, that of the second follows.

Difference means limitation, so it cannot characterize the primal, unconditioned reality. The *brahman* is the transcendental precondition of there being anything at all. It transcends the determinations characteristic of finite beings. It is prior to all oppositions such as subject and object, knower and known, cause and effect. It has no features (*nirguṇa*) and is exempt from actions and changes (*niṣkriyā*). Since it neither owes its existence to anything else nor is conditioned by anything outside itself, it is beyond the categories of being and non-being if these are thought of as pertaining only to property-bearing entities that belong to kinds. It follows that the *brahman* eludes conceptual or linguistic description because the foundational reality is not *a being* or *a something* distinguishable from other finite things. This understanding of *ātman* and the *brahman* repudiates an already established tradition of emanationist Vedāntic theological interpretation called *pariṇāma-vāda* that posits a single, self-transforming divine substance that really constitutes itself as all individual souls and material entities.

Śaṅkara's via negativa

While the *brahman* per se cannot be signified by words for kinds, actions, attributes or relations, it may be approached along the path of negation by denials of what it is not. A sophisticated variety of the *via negativa* can be found in Śaṅkara's commentary on the statement in *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.1.1: 'The *brahman* is reality, consciousness, infinite' ('*satyaṃ jñānam anantaṃ brahma*'). Some Vedāntins construe this as meaning that the *brahman* has features – it is *saguṇa* rather than *nirguṇa* – and thus is not simple. Śaṅkara thinks that when properly understood, the *śruti* makes an identifying reference to the *brahman* without implying that it is complex. It does this because the three grammatical predicates are used definitionally, as three different names of the same thing, rather than descriptively. He says that descriptively used predicates distinguish something from other members of the same class, while definitionally used ones demarcate their subject from everything else. The predicates are used to exclude their normal

meanings and function together to intimate the *brahman*, even though it is really beyond the range of linguistic meanings. Śaṅkara resolves the *śruti* into three distinct identity statements: 'The *brahman* is reality.' 'The *brahman* is consciousness.' 'The *brahman* is infinite.' The statement has a simple sense (*akhaṇḍārtha*). The three descriptions, albeit functioning in different ways, name the same thing – the foundational reality that is infinite consciousness.

Śaṅkara begins by stipulating that something is real when it does not deviate from the form that is known to be its own. So by definition, the real is constant and immutable. Something is called unreal when it does deviate from its proper form. Hence, modifications are unreal. The definition, 'the *brahman* is reality' excludes modifications from the nature of the *brahman*. It also means that the *brahman* is the ultimate cause of the cosmos. Now the theory of causation termed *satkāryavāda* – the idea that effects pre-exist as potentialities in their causal substrate prior to their actualization – suggests that effects are ontologically continuous with their causal substrate. This may be taken as implying that substrative causes share the nature of their effects. Given that the effected cosmos is in part material, the impression may follow that the *brahman* contains *in potentia* elements of materiality. Hence it is said that 'The *brahman* is consciousness.' Śaṅkara says that the word (*jñānam*) for consciousness here has a stative sense of pure awareness (*jñāptimātram*), when it applies to the *brahman*.

The definition 'The *brahman* is infinite' excludes the possibility that the sort of knowing predicated of the *brahman* is ordinary cognitive agency that involves diversification by particular cognitions and objects of cognition. So when the 'knowing' is being used as a definition of the unchanging *brahman*, this is in an extraordinary sense different from the everyday meanings that are derived from the root sense of the verb. Śaṅkara explains the everyday process of cognition of which the soul (*ātman*) is the unchanging witness as follows: The embodied mind (*buddhi*), a limiting condition (*upādhi*) wrongly superimposed upon the *ātman*, becomes informed by sense-mediated phenomena such as sounds and colours. When those phenomena are irradiated by the light of the *ātman*-consciousness, they become its objects. Such limited presentations to the *ātman*-consciousness are what are usually meant by words for awareness and knowing. They are the root meanings of the verb 'to know.' It is such changing events that are wrongly supposed by the unenlightened to be real properties of the *ātman*.

'Infinite' also means that the sort of reality attributed to the *brahman* is unconditioned by space and time. The *brahman* is also infinite or unlimited

in respect of its ontological status. Its reality is not like that of entities that belong to kinds and which are the possessors of various properties such that they may be spoken of as different from one another. For example, a cow is not a horse and vice versa. Also, individuals within each kind differ in respect of their physical characteristics. Differences of that kind cannot apply to the *brahman*. On the other hand, the *brahman* is said to be ‘not other’ than everything else (*sarvānanyatvam brahmaṇaḥ*) since it is the substrative cause of all entities. Does this mean that the *brahman* is the same as the cosmos? It does not. Rather it means that the *brahman* does not differ from finite entities because it has nothing in common with them. A cow and a horse share the nature of animality and differ because they are varieties of it. A man can be taller than another in respect of height. Red things differ from green ones in respect of their shared nature of being coloured. But there is no shared nature in respect of which the *brahman* may differ from the world of entities. It is in this sense that it is ‘not other’ than everything else.

It might be wondered how statements such as ‘I am the *brahman*’ and ‘*Tat tvam asi*’ mean the identity of the *brahman* and the *ātman* given that the personal pronouns usually designate embodied centres of agency, thinking and feeling. Śaṅkara says that when they are purified of such connotations and used in grammatical co-ordination with terms signifying the absolute Being, they can discriminate a simple immaculate state. For instance, reflection on the pronoun ‘I’ may lead to an intellectual conclusion that the embodied ego is not the soul because it is objectifiable, and nothing that one can objectify can be one’s true identity. We shall see below that such modifications are seen as illegitimate by those who interpret the Scriptures theistically and claim to be following their literal senses.

Maṇḍana Miśra

The other founding father of Advaita Vedānta, Śaṅkara’s contemporary Maṇḍana Miśra, author of the *Brahmasiddhi*, concurs that our true nature is identical with the *brahman* that is other than conditioned reality, pure consciousness, blissful, unique, imperishable and ungenerated. He says that if the source is undifferentiated, so must be its products. All plurality is a function of beginningless innate error (*avidyā*). While Śaṅkara tends to characterize the *brahman* as ‘pure consciousness’, Maṇḍana prefers to formulate it as a unity of undifferentiated being that is also the universal

identity common to all things.¹⁰ The absolute Being is given as such in every act of pre-conceptual, pre-discursive perception. Initial perceptual experience is non-conceptual and relates only to being as such. It is the ensuing conceptual cognitions that comprehend particularities. Everyday thinking, which prompts activity and presupposes that there are real differences between individual entities, is mental construction (*vikalpa*). Constructive cognitions or representations (*avabhāsa*) that involve differentia and oppositions are erroneous (*bhrānti*) in that they disguise rather than disclose the nature of pure being. The organizing structures of our minds ('this is different from that', 'this is the difference between the two') derive from an inherited beginningless supply of constructive ideas. Maṇḍana argues that no sense can be made of the notion of difference as an entity, either substantive or attributive, in its own right. Difference, and hence the finite individuality of demarcated entities, is not substantial (*niḥsvabhāva*) and does not enter into the fabric of reality. It is simply manifested by constructive thoughts and language, and as such cannot be truly real. The world of differentiated individual entities is a fabrication, manifested due to beginningless error (*anādi-avidyā*). Like Śaṅkara he thinks that it is the ultimately unreal individual selves, mistakenly constructing themselves as centres of awareness and agency different from the *brahman*, that are the bearers of *avidyā*. Its object (*viśaya*) is the *brahman*, whose nature we misunderstand if we view it as the source of real plurality. By contrast, most later Advaitins following Padmapāda (700–750 A.D.) and his contemporary Sureśvara say that *avidyā* is a causal force, analogically called *māyā* (illusion – it is what the magician produces), responsible for the complex, shared virtual reality that is the cosmos, and that it is a power (*śakti*) of the *brahman*. But Maṇḍana says that it is the individual identities (*jīva*) that are polluted by error, not the *brahman* that is always pure and constant light. Maṇḍana thinks that there is a mystery here, since the very constitution of individuality is a case of *avidyā*. But he is explicit that if error belonged to the *brahman*'s nature, it would never cease and there would be no possibility of release from rebirth. Moreover, it would be the *brahman* that transmigrates and the *brahman* that is released from rebirth. Further, the release of one would entail the release of all, because by seeing plurality it is just the *brahman* that transmigrates and by seeing non-difference it is released. Hence it is the individuals transmigrating due to error that are released by knowledge.

After c.950 A.D., two schools of thought about this question appear. One is called the *Bhāmātī* school, named after Vācaspati Miśra's (950–1000 A.D.)

commentary on Śaṅkara's *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya*, and the other is called the *Vivaraṇa* school, named after Prakāśātman's commentary on Padmapāda's *Pañcapādikā*. The *Bhāmatī* school follows Maṇḍana and says that it is the individual selves that are the substrate of *avidyā* and that the *brahman* is its object. There is a problem here. How can the individual selves be the substrate or support of *avidyā* when the experience of individual selfhood is itself a product of *avidyā*? They do not exist in advance, unaffected by ignorance, in such a way that they could be its substrate. Rather, they are constituted by ignorance. The response is simply that the association between individuals and *avidyā* is beginningless. In other words, it is something for which there is no explanation. The *Vivaraṇa* school says that since the *brahman* is the sole reality, it has to be both the substrate and the object of *avidyā*. In this they can appeal to the authority of Sureśvara, who makes the point that since the *jīva* is a product of *avidyā*, it cannot be its support. But is it not a contradiction to hold that the *brahman*, which is pure knowing, is the very basis of ignorance? The reply is that the problem is only apparent. The *brahman* is the substratum of error only in the sense that it is the substratum of all cognition and the precondition of all subjective and objective experiences. One might suggest that the view of Sureśvara, Sarvajñātman, Padmapāda, Prakāśātman and their followers to the effect that the *brahman* is both the substrate and the object of *avidyā* is an aspect of a mentality that understands cosmic variety, whose nature and occurrence is mysterious, as ultimately having a transcendent source. The alternative view, articulated by Maṇḍana and Vācaspati Miśra is perhaps more inclined to blame the tendency of imperfect beings to conceive themselves as separate from the source of their being.

Śaṅkara had applied the expression 'inexpressible (*anirvacanīya*) as one thing or another' to the amorphous primary causal state that is prior to the differentiation of names and forms. Maṇḍana modifies the formula to mean 'inexpressible as real or unreal' and applies it to *avidyā* and its consequences. He says that error is neither the nature of the *brahman* nor is it anything else. It is not absolute non-being, like a pure fiction, because erroneous cognitions (*bhrānti*) occur and have practical consequences. But it is not an authentic reality because errors are corrected. Were it real in an absolute sense, it would never cease, and liberation would be impossible. It would be another reality in addition to the *brahman* – indeed, one that is antithetical to the nature of the *brahman*. But were we to say that it is non-existent, it would be difficult to explain the phenomenon of bondage to rebirth and our everyday

experience of practical transactions (*vyavahāra*). To count as real, something must have a determinate identity. But that is what error lacks, and hence it is indeterminable as real or unreal. Maṇḍana thinks that to be inexpressible is to be unintelligible and that what is unintelligible cannot be authentically real. We see here the origin of what will become the established principle that the working of *avidyā* and the very occurrence of the differentiated cosmos are essentially mysterious. Evidently, any philosophy saying that the complex world (including persons), as we know it, is the consequence of error and that the authentic reality is simple consciousness is bound to acknowledge that the occurrence of error is a mystery. Cognitive errors are also mysterious in the sense that until they are corrected by knowledge, they seem perfectly real and are accepted as true for the time being. The magician's illusions are convincing while they last. Dreams are only recognized for what they are from the standpoint of the waking state. There is the phenomenon of 'brainwashing' or the spontaneous social construction of myths that condition the minds, language, behaviour and purposeful activities of almost everyone. Cultures entertain long-standing beliefs that turn out to be false, but they enabled people to inhabit the world. Such cases of operative false beliefs or uncontradicted assumptions about the nature of things, the tradition will call '*saṃvṛti-satya*' or '*vyavahārika-satya*'. Those expressions mean provisional, conventional and everyday reality in contradistinction to some conception of fundamental reality. The argument that the success of everyday beliefs requires only an ultimately false *assumption* that reality is as it ordinarily appears to us – an argument primarily directed at the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika realists, who maintain that knowledge is only knowledge if it refers to a structured domain of objects existing prior to and independently of cognition – will be developed by Śrī Harṣa (1125–1180 A.D.) in his *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā*. It should be noted that after Prakāśātman, most Advaitins are careful to distinguish the fictions and illusions (*prātibhāsika*) from long-standing uncontradicted false beliefs.

Śaṅkara insists that gnosis is both necessary and sufficient for release from rebirth, an existential transformation that may be the condition of one still living (*jīvan-mukti*). Indeed, for him continued engagement with religious practices of any sort is antithetical to enlightenment. (The matter is elaborately dealt with in the commentary on *Brahma-Sūtra* 1.1.4.) By contrast, Maṇḍana believes that the repeated practice (*abhyāsa*) of ritual actions and meditation on one's discursive understanding of the *mahāvākyas* are useful in that they intensify the insights received from those scriptural statements of non-duality and counteract the still forceful residual traces of

ignorance. This difference between the two seminal figures will remain controversial in the subsequent tradition, for it concerns the questions of the role of scripture and whether basically linguistic understanding that occurs within the arena of *avidyā* can produce enlightenment. There is also the more general question about the importance of religious practices: the ‘radicals’ follow Śaṅkara and hold that the observance of obligatory ritual duties is unnecessary for the enlightened person, while those of a more conservative disposition say that the performance of social and religious duties is still required.

Padmapāda, Prakāśātman, Vimuktātman and Sarvajñātman

Padmapāda belonged to the generation after Śaṅkara and composed the *Pañcapādikā* on the first five parts of his mentor’s *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya*. Whereas Śaṅkara had understood not knowing (*avidyā*) as error and the confusion of one’s true identity with what it is not, Padmapāda is innovative in treating *avidyā* as a basic metaphysical category when he says that it is the power of misconception in the transcendental consciousness that appears as the objective world. He also introduces the terminology of *vivarta* (phenomenal manifestation), expressing the idea that effects are less real (*viśama-sattā*) than their causal substrate (*upādāna*). This will be interpreted as meaning that the cosmos is an apparent transformation of its cause rather than a real one (*pariṇāma-vāda*) where the effects have the same degree of reality as their substrative cause.¹¹ Basically, we see here the idea that what truly is – the coincidence of being and consciousness – appears as something other than what it is. This notion of *vivarta* is congruent with the idea that the world and its source are inexpressible as one thing or another. From the point of view of the *brahman*, the cosmos is false or unreal (*mithyā*), but from our point of view it *exists*. This leads naturally to the formulation that *avidyā* and its works are indeterminable as real or unreal. The notion of falsity (*mithyātva*) is perhaps evaluative rather than primarily ontological. To say that the physical and mental domain with all its changes, imperfections and limits is false is to say that it is not authentically real or that in the final analysis *it is not what really matters*. This is not to deny that it exists. It seems that this is what they are trying to capture in the formulations that the world and its source are neither real nor unreal.

Padmapāda says that the *brahman* is the root cause on the basis of which the proliferated cosmos ‘unfurls’ or appears (*vivartate*). The pure *brahman* is the substrate of the appearance of the infinite number of individual centres of experience (*jīva*) that are constituted due to beginninglessly established *avidyā*. It is *avidyā* that is responsible for phenomenal plurality, and *avidyā* is a power (*śakti*) of the *brahman*. It is sometimes called ‘*māyā*’. He characterized *avidyā* as a non-conscious (*jaḍa*) principle. The rationale is that if *avidyā* is other than *vidyā* and *vidyā* has the nature of consciousness, then *avidyā* cannot be conscious. We might consider here the familiar modern claim that there are non-conscious, or sub-conscious, psychological functions, over which we have no control. Perhaps the Advaitins would be prepared to put natural and inherited *avidyā* in this category. This causal *avidyā* is the substrative cause of both the world-appearance and of mundane cases of misconceptions. *Avidyā* thus construed veils the luminous nature of the *brahman*-nature present in the mistaken construction that is the individual soul. In association with the workings of *karma* and the mental apparatus, it produces the experience of limited selfhood that is the substrate of individual experience and agency. Śaṅkara had identified *avidyā* (error) as the mutual superimposition of the subjective and the objective. It is a universal human failure, a constitutive imperfection in human nature. But for Padmapāda, it is rather the cause of the notion of the individual ego, of the process of superimposition and of all misconceptions. Most significantly perhaps, we see here the first statement of the view, rejected by Maṇḍana and Śaṅkara, that it is the *brahman* that is the ultimate substratum of *avidyā* and the consequent mistaken belief that we are individual personal agents.

The doctrine that the cosmos is a phenomenal manifestation (*vivarta*) of the transcendent *brahman*, understood as objectless, undifferentiated consciousness, when it is concealed by a power called *avidyā* becomes explicit in the works of the tenth-century thinkers Prakāśātman, Vimuktātman and Sarvajñātman. Prakāśātman (c.950 A.D.) wrote the *Vivaraṇa* on Padmapāda’s *Pañcapādikā*, and developed that thinker’s views. His most influential innovation is the reification of *avidyā* as something positive and effective (*bhāva-rūpa*), rather than as a privation of knowledge. Ignorance as something positive, as opposed to the mere absence of knowledge, is exemplified by cases where we recognize that we do not know some matter of fact. The example is held to explain that ignorance does not obliterate the light of consciousness. The point is that ignorance construed as such is not opposite in nature to knowledge. Hence it is compatible with

it and will not be eliminated by the state of pure knowing that is the *brahman*.

Sarvajñātman (c.950 A.D.), the author of the *Samkṣepaśārīrakam* and the *Pañcaprakriyā*, explicitly states that the distinctive mark of monistic Vedānta is its view that the plural cosmos is a phenomenal manifestation (*vivarta*) of its causal substrate (*vedāntapakṣas tu vivartavādaḥ*), rather than a real transformation or self-differentiation of the one divine substance. He calls this phenomenal manifestation the ‘state of *avidyā*’. When that obtains, the pure *brahman* appears to be the ultimate cause of cosmic plurality through the instrumentality of the principle of positive ignorance and its effects. That power of misconception depends upon the *brahman*, which is also its object. *Avidyā* has two functions: it conceals the nature of the absolute Being as the pure light of consciousness, and it projects phenomenal diversity. In the fifth chapter of the *Pañcaprakriyā*, Sarvajñātman propounds the theory that the pure *brahman* appears to be the efficient cause of the material cosmos, the presiding deity and the internal witness known to each individual conscious being. In other words, it appears to be diversified as the plural world, it appears to be the divine creator and regulator, and it appears to be the innermost constitutive element in the individual souls (*jīva*). The real inner nature (*pratyagātman*), which is nothing other than the purely conscious *brahman*, becomes individuated as a knower, an experiencer, an agent and as one who is subject to Vedic mandates in virtue of connection with the physical elements constituting the cosmos. The individual soul is just the *brahman* that is implicated in finite conditions (*brahmaiva saṁsarati*) due to its own *avidyā*, and it is the *brahman* that is released thanks to its own knowledge. The *saṁsāra* of the *brahman* means its being the substrate of the plural cosmos, its being the sovereign divinity and its being the individual souls. Liberation is the destruction of those conditions. *Avidyā* is held to ‘belong’ to the *brahman* that is its ultimate substrate, because otherwise it would be an independent ‘rival’ principle. It is only in virtue of its modality as the inner identity of the finite souls (*jīva*), its being the precondition of finite experiences, that the *brahman* is said to be the substrate of knowing and not knowing. He argues that the view that it is the *jīva* that is the ultimate subject of knowing and non-knowing lacks explanatory value, because the *jīvas* are constituted as such due to the workings of *avidyā*. In addition, the view that it is the finite selves that are the ultimate substrata of *avidyā* implies that they are realities in their own right, identities distinct from the *brahman*.

Vimuktātman (c.950 A.D.) wrote the *Iṣṭasiddhi*, where much attention is paid to discussions of cognitive error. The work contains a succinct statement of the monistic metaphysic: what is unreal never comes into being. Whatever is, is indestructible. Hence, being is always just being. Hence being never changes. Hence it does not show itself in virtue of a connection with anything else. Hence when it appears, it is self-luminous consciousness and free from duality. Hence, material things that are complex and changing are manifested due to *avidyā*. They seem as if real like things in dreams before one wakes up.

The first part of the *Iṣṭasiddhi* identifies the unconditioned reality (the *brahman*) as consciousness (*anubhūti*) that establishes its own existence. As such, it is independent of anything else (*an-anyādhīna*). We saw above that the undeniable fact of consciousness is unique in that while everything else requires consciousness for the revelation of its existence, consciousness does not need anything outside itself. Intrinsically reflexive consciousness is self-establishing. Vimuktātman argues that were consciousness ever the object of experience in the way in which physical objects such as pots are, its insentience would be entailed. He argues that what establishes its own existence exists necessarily. Hence it is unoriginated and exempt from modifications and cessation. What are perceived as different objects are not properties of consciousness. Being free from limitations, it cannot be measured (*ameya*). Having no finite properties, it is infinite. Finally, what is not originated can have no intrinsic parts because there is no possibility of composition out of pre-existing factors. Hence consciousness is simple. He continues to say that non-dual (*abheda*) consciousness is a single (*ekam*) reality that does not differ from anything else because there is nothing else. It is never the object of knowledge because that would entail its dependence upon something else and the denial that it is 'without a second'. As has been said, consciousness is self-revealing and self-establishing. Its singularity is not a property.

Some dazzling dialectic follows – a style of reasoning that will be deployed at great length and to great effect by Śrī Harṣa (1125–1180 A.D.) in his *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā*. Vimuktātman argues that it is not possible to specify a difference between subject and object, between the perceiver and the perceived, because the former, being simply given but never perceived, cannot be identified in relation to anything else. The suggestion that the perceiver differentiates itself in virtue of its being self-revealing introduces a discussion about the nature of difference. If difference were the same as the essential nature as an entity, then it would not require correlatives. It would also follow that nothing would really be separate from

everything else, entities effectively merging into one another. Difference understood as essential nature serves to only prove identity. If it cannot be the essence, it would be a property, and understood by a distinct mode of cognition: there would be 'difference-perception' parallel to taste-perception and colour-perception. But if 'being different' is a further real *property* (*dharma*) of an entity parallel to its colour etc., it would have to be different (another property) from its substrate. This would be to treat difference as an entity that is different from the entities that differ. Each case of difference would require the postulation of further differences. An infinite regress results, and the notion of difference becomes inexplicable. In the light of this, it is difficult to see how we could say that there is any difference between the perceiver and the perceived, between subjectivity and objectivity. The foundational reality of intrinsically reflexive consciousness is indubitably self-established. If there is no difference between consciousness and what is experienced, experienced diversity must have the nature of consciousness. But this seems to introduce variety and change into consciousness, which is supposed to be uniform. In response, Vimuktātman says that experiential variety is insubstantial or not truly real (*avastu*). Experiential variety is fabricated like a magical illusion (*māyā*): it is insubstantial, but we are still taken in. He uses an analogy in which permanent background consciousness is likened to a wall, and the manifold contents of experience are likened to a picture painted upon it. The wall does not contribute to the matter of the picture painted on it. The picture is not a modification of the wall in the way that pots are modifications of clay. Nor is it a change in the qualities of the wall. The wall was there before the picture and will remain after it has been washed away. But the painting needs the wall.

Experiential variety is attributed to an error-generating metaphysical power (*avidyā-śakti*). Its operation explains why there are experiences of matter and plurality when the truth is that reality is just pure consciousness. Neither the *avidyā-śakti* nor the world of experience that it produces is authentically real, nor are they non-existent. It is knowledge of the *brahman*, understood as the self-manifestation of transcendental pure consciousness that counteracts the *avidyā-śakti*, destroys misconceptions and leaves consciousness shining in its own radiance. For everyday purposes, the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) operate successfully in the sphere where oblivion of the truth of non-duality prevails. But since Scripture (*śruti*) is such a means of pseudo-knowledge, how can it reveal the truth? We see the answer here. The truth is self-revealing and needs no *pramāṇa*. Scripture as a means of knowing does not produce anything: it simply destroys

misconceptions by conveying the falsity of the experience of duality. It does not need to tell us anything new.

Śrī Harṣa and his *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā*

Śrī Harṣa denies that conceptual thought can reveal the truth, and he seeks to demolish the arguments of those who think that reason can establish the nature of a genuinely real mind-independent world. He does this by demonstrating that all the definitions of the means of knowing, varieties of correspondence theories of truth and basically real categories offered by realists are incoherent. Common sense revolts against the amazing Advaitin claim that authentic reality is tranquil undifferentiated consciousness. So he sets about demonstrating that the common-sense world view is infected by contradictions and cannot be true. Śrī Harṣa does not offer any 'theories' of his own, being content with the one unassailable truth that consciousness is the sole self-revealing and self-authenticating reality.

A typical line of argumentation runs like this: Difference may be understood as a sort of relation. But under analysis it can be seen as something that unites rather than separates. If two or more items are 'internally related', their being so connected is an aspect of their natures. Since the relation is a two-way affair, they are really united and not different. So the notion of internal relations leads to monism. If we say that relations are external, meaning that they connect two different items without affecting the natures of their terms, then it is not clear that they are really related at all. If we want to avoid this conclusion, we might say that relations are realities in their own right: $a + R + b$. But now we need other real relations to connect R to a and R to b . An infinite regress results, and it follows that nothing can ever be connected. So all relations are internal and monism must be true.

Scriptural exegesis and the significance of coreferential constructions

The Advaita tradition is inspired by certain Upaniṣadic passages suggestive of the identity of the soul and the absolute Being such as:

‘You are That’ (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.8.7: ‘*tat tvam asi*’).

‘In the beginning, all this was just Being, one only without a second’ (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.2.1).

But many of the scriptures have a dualistic sense, some clearly suggesting a difference between the *brahman* and the individual souls and the cosmos, others talking in terms of distinct agents, instruments and goals that are aspects of external religious practices, and others obviously supposing that the Supreme Principle is a being with glorious characteristics. Advaita Vedānta draws a distinction between the ultimate authority of texts teaching non-difference and those that cannot possibly be construed in a non-dualistic fashion. While this may appear controversial, it is not unprecedented for the Mīmāṃsakas had already distinguished between those texts that prescribe actions (*vidhi*) and those that merely describe how and why to do things (*arthavāda*).

We have seen that Advaitins believe that some scriptures, such as ‘That thou art’ (*‘Tat tvam asi*’) and ‘I am the *brahman*’ (*‘Ahaṃ brahma asmi*’), mean the featureless character of reality, and the identity of the soul and the *brahman*. Many of those statements have a grammatical form known as co-referentiality or grammatical co-ordination (*sāmānādhikaraṇya*). The grammarians define this as the reference to one thing of a number of words having different grounds for their application (*pravṛtti-nimitta*). The interpretation of such statements is central to Vedāntic theological dialectic. It is central because it is the language of the Scriptures (*śruti*) that provides the only means of knowledge of anything that transcends the bounds of sense-perception, and *a fortiori* inference. But language is often susceptible of different interpretations, so a philosopher’s theory of meaning, of how language works and what verbal formulations convey to the understanding, will exercise a considerable influence on this metaphysics. The Advaitin position here is that certain scriptures, albeit on the surface exhibiting complex linguistic form, have a unitary simple meaning (*akhaṇḍārtha*) and thus convey a non-relational and featureless essence. Where the *sāmānādhikaraṇya* constructions are concerned, the Advaitins put the emphasis on the unity of reference and construe the coreferential constructions as statements of identity. They have a simple, impartite sense (*akhaṇḍārtha*). They maintain that this is compatible with the words’ having different grounds for their operation. A distinction can be made between what a word or sentence refers to and the mode or modes under which it presents the referent. Their view is that an expression may include

different such modes of presentation while signifying a single simple reality. They also appeal to a familiar distinction between what is usually, literally and primarily meant by words (*mukhyārtha*) and what is non-literally or secondarily indicated (*lakṣaṇā*) in order to explain how certain scriptural statements convey an undifferentiated essence, despite surface appearances. In certain circumstances, a non-literal interpretation of a statement is the only possible one. The stock examples illustrating non-literal usages are the expressions, 'Devadatta is a lion', whose purport (*tātparya*) of course indicates that he is brave, and 'The village on the Ganges', which indicates that it is on the bank of the river. In both cases, the literal sense is impossible and is thus suppressed. The impossibility or absurdity of the literal sense triggers a transference from the literal semantic content to a non-literal one.

The Advaitin theory is that in the case of coreferential constructions whose purport is an undifferentiated essence, incompatible primary senses are superseded in the process of semantic transference, while those aspects of the primary meanings that are compatible are retained. Advaitins such as Sarvajñātman and Prakāśātman say that coreferentiality is the non-literal reference (*lakṣaṇayā vṛtti*) to a single entity by means of the discrimination of the referent. The semantically modified terms in grammatical co-ordination are held to indicate obliquely a unitary sense (*akhaṇḍārtha*) and convey an undifferentiated essence. This form of partial oblique predication is technically termed '*jahadajahallakṣaṇā*'. They use the statement of identity about a person, 'This is that Devadatta' (*So'yaṃ Devadatta*), as an example of this non-literal semantic function. The demonstratives 'this' and 'that' primarily signify different times and places. So taken literally, the statement would mean something like, 'This man standing in front of me now is the same one whom I saw yesterday in the market.' They hold that the grammatical co-ordination of the two pronouns means simple essential identity (*svarūpaikyam*). For each to denote just the man Devadatta, purely referentially, the pronouns have to be understood non-literally. When the meaning components expressing the different times and places are eliminated, the terms corefer to the individual essence of Devadatta. In this way, the statement is understood as having a unitary sense.

This may be illustrated by examples from the second chapter of Sarvajñātman's *Pañcaprakriyā*. He says that release from rebirth follows only from understanding the meaning of the principal scriptural statements (*mahāvākya*) such as 'I am the *brahman*'. Understanding such a statement

arises from discriminative knowledge of the meanings of the two terms ‘I’ and ‘*brahman*’. There are two sorts of meaning: the literal and usual (*vācya*), and what is non-literally indicated (*lakṣya*). The former is complex and the latter pure and simple. The word ‘I’ is complex in that it literally signifies both the inner conscious reality and the body, mind and senses with which it is wrongly associated. The word ‘*brahman*’ is complex in that it literally signifies non-dual blissful consciousness when it is associated with the *avidyā* that is the causal substrate of embodiment. Because the non-dual blissful consciousness signified by the word ‘*brahman*’ is imperceptibly associated with the inner conscious reality signified by the word ‘I’, the meanings of ‘I’ and ‘*brahman*’ can be co-ordinated and refer to the same state (*sāmānādhikaraṇya*) without any conflict. This is because when the incompatible elements of meaning peculiar to each are eliminated, they both indicate (*lakṣyete*) a pure and simple meaning. When the connotations of embodiment are eliminated, the part of the meaning that is inner awareness is indicated by ‘I’. By eliminating the meaning of causal *avidyā* that is responsible for embodiment, the word ‘*brahman*’ indicates non-dual blissful consciousness. The coalescence of the suitably ‘purified’ indicated meanings produces a unitive experience that is described as the freedom enjoyed by one who is still alive in the world (*jīvan-mukta*).

In the case of ‘*Tat tvam asi*’ (‘That thou art’), which may be construed either as a relational statement or as one of identity, the two pronouns appear to differ in their literal senses. Accordingly, the Advaitin has to eliminate aspects of those meanings in order to secure an impartite sense. Sarvajñātman says that the word ‘*Tat*’ literally expresses the *brahman* as associated with *avidyā* and hence understood as the cause of the cosmos. The personal pronoun ‘*tvam*’ (‘thou’) usually means the individual self (*jīva*) that is misidentified with the body. But in another aspect of its meaning, it signifies the purely conscious inner identity (*pratyagātman*). The individual self, as the passive witness that is distinct from its experiences, really shares the same nature as the supreme identity or the pure *brahman* (*tat*) in that both are without features (*nirguṇa*), impartite, without attachments, eternally pure consciousness, always released, authentically real and supremely blissful. When the term ‘*Tat*’ is purified of connotations of cosmic causality through *avidyā* and the term ‘*tvam*’ is purified of connotations of personal individuality and finite experience, they are understood together in the identity statement ‘That thou art’ as obliquely indicating the nature of the purely conscious reality.

Illustrative extracts from Śaṅkara's works

For Śaṅkara, constancy is a mark of the real. So the fact that the phenomenological character or 'subjective feel' of awareness is the same in all cognitions, regardless of what they are about, is held to show that consciousness is basically real. In his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.16 ('Of the non-existent, there is no coming into being; there is no ceasing to be of the existent. The difference between the two is seen by those who understand the truth.') Śaṅkara formulates a substantial conception of 'Being' as the changeless basis of all finite and transitory existences. 'Being' thus understood is not involved in causal relations and is outside space and time. In the background here is a reaction to Dharmakīrti's espousal of dynamic causal efficacy as criterial of reality, with its entailment that anything permanent, in so far as it is static, would be unreal.¹²

Unconditioned being is the foundational cause of the cosmos. Its general features (*jātīyaka-dharma*), as opposed to those conditions (*upādhi*) that we, or some scriptures, might superimpose upon it, are universal presence, eternity, omniscience, omnipotence and its being the true nature of everyone. Nothing finite and nothing whose existence depends upon its relation to other things can be truly real. The same applies to anything that is a product. Products are transformations (*vikāra*), and a transformation (being a derivation) lacks a nature of its own. Thought expresses something truly real when it is constant and unvarying, and when a thought expresses something that comes and goes, then it concerns what is other than Being.

Bhagavad Gītā 2.17 asks the question, 'What is "Being" that exists timelessly?' Śaṅkara replies that it is the condition of the possibility of anything: Everything is pervaded by the *brahman*, called Being. This Reality never deviates from the nature that is its own because it has no parts. It cannot suffer loss because it has no properties. It is the true identity (*ātman*) of everyone. Commenting on *Gītā* 2.18, he says that this timeless, changeless and indestructible nature cannot be determined by any of the means of knowing (*pramāṇa*). Dismissing the suggestion that it is determined by scripture and by perception, he responds that consciousness establishes its own existence (*svataḥ siddha*). It is only if such consciousness, *qua* knowing subject, is already a given that the truth-seeker's use of

pramāṇas is possible. We could not act with a view to understanding knowable objects unless we had already understood ourselves as subjects. The transcendental subject is a given, a presupposition of the sort of experience that we have. Scripture is the ultimate *pramāṇa* in the sense that it has its epistemic authority about the transcendental subject only by stripping away properties that have been mistakenly superimposed upon that identity, and not by providing us new information about something previously unknown.

From Śaṅkara's *Upadeśa-Sāhasrī* (p. 68):

Permanently unchanging consciousness, whose nature is self-luminosity, establishes its own existence since it does not need a means of knowing for itself. [Everything in the world requires consciousness to reveal or establish its existence. But consciousness is unique in not needing anything external to establish it: it is self-revealing.] Anything other [than consciousness] that is insentient exists for the sake of something else, since it functions in complexes. And in so far as that which exists for the sake of the something else produces experiences of pleasure, pain and delusion, it follows that it is what is not the self. Hence its existence (*astitva*) is not authentically real (*paramārtha*). Just as the contents of illusions have no real existence apart from consciousness, so everyday experience of differentiation has no real existence apart from consciousness. And the permanently unchanging nature of the light of consciousness, the authentic reality, follows from its uninterrupted presence. Consciousness is uniform because it is unvarying in the midst of all the different ideas, which come and go. Just as the different ideas that come and go in dreams are said not to exist in reality, so the different ideas inconstantly presented to waking consciousness must be unreal too. Because there is no perspective on consciousness other than that of consciousness itself, it is not the sort of thing that can be accepted or rejected, and there is nothing else.

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 1.1.31

Scriptures such as '*tat tvam asi*' ('You are that') and '*ahaṁ brahma asmi*' ('I am the Brahman') show that what is called the 'individual self' is not ultimately distinct from the Brahman. It is the *brahman* that is called 'individual person', the agent and the experiencer, when it is regarded as diversified as a result of properties (*upādhi*) superimposed upon it, such as body, mind and sense-faculties. Some passages reveal the true nature

of Pure Being by negating differentia resulting from the superimposition of features. They focus attention on one's inner identity (*pratyag-ātman*).

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 2.3.7

But surely soul (*ātman*) is different from the atmosphere etc., so must it not also be an effect?

The Soul is not a modification because that would mean that it is an effect.

We cannot deny the reality of soul without self-contradiction. It is not a contingent property of anything else since it establishes its own existence and that existence is not established by any of the means of knowing (*pramāṇa*). One uses the means of knowing to establish previously unknown objects of knowledge. But the soul, because it is the basis of the exercise of the means of knowing, is established prior to their functioning. The rejection of a reality of that sort is impossible. A person may deny the existence of some entity or another, but he cannot deny the subject doing the rejecting.

In expressions such as 'I know something present', 'I have known something past' and 'I shall know something future', the objects known differ as present, past and future, but the knower does not change because by nature it is wholly present through the entire course of experience.

Most followers of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika tradition hold that while the synthetic and unified nature of human experience presupposes an enduring subject (*ātman*), these subjects are not intrinsically conscious. They say that cognitions (and feelings, desires and intentions) are contingent properties that occur when the embodied *ātman* is connected with a mind (*manas*), the material faculty that co-ordinates sensory data. Śaṅkara addresses this view under *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 2.3.18:

[The opposing view]: If consciousness were a permanent feature it would persist in the states of deep sleep, swoon and demonic possession. But people report that they did not experience anything in such states. But in normal life, people are actively intelligent. Hence, given that consciousness is not constant, the *ātman* is only contingently conscious.

We reply that knowing consciousness is permanent, and it is one's real identity because it is not produced. Unchanging pure being exists as the individual person when it is associated with superimposed properties. Scripture reveals that consciousness is the true nature of pure being in definitional passages like, 'The Brahman is knowledge and bliss' and 'The Brahman is reality, consciousness, infinite'. If the individual really shares the nature of the unconditioned reality, then permanent consciousness is its essential nature.

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 2.3.30

As long as one's identity is that of a transmigrator, as long as the *saṃsāric* state has not been terminated by the realization of one's true identity, association of the soul with some mind and personality continues. And while there is a relation to the superimposed property (*upādhi*) that is the mind, then there is individual personality and the series of births. But in reality there is no individual person apart from the nature that is fabricated by relation to the superimposed property that is the mind. This relation of the superimposed property that is the mind to one's real identity presupposes misconception (*mithyājñāna*), and misconception continues until knowledge arises. So as long as there is no comprehension of Pure Being, connection with the superimposed property that is the mind obtains.

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 2.3.40 answers the question whether agency is innate and natural (*svābhāvikam*) to one's identity, or is it a superimposed property?

Agency does not belong to one's true identity because it would follow that there could be no liberation from rebirth. Were agency an essential feature of identity, it could never be separated from it, just as heat is inseparable from fire. The ultimate human good cannot happen unless one is free from agency because agency always involves suffering... Agency is not essential because it is one of the properties superimposed upon the fundamental identity.

The enlightened realize that there is no individual person, no agent and no enjoyer of experiences, all of which are concepts superimposed upon the true nature.

But surely if there are no real personal agents distinct from body, mind and sense-faculties and distinct from the transcendent nature, then it must be the transcendent nature that is the transmigrator, the agent and the enjoyer.

No – because agency and experience are presentations due to *avidyā*. Scriptures reveal that being an agent and experiencer belongs to the sphere of *avidyā*. Agency is not an essential feature of the Soul.

It could be argued that agency must be an essential feature of one's identity because otherwise the scriptures enjoining actions would have no purpose.

We respond that scriptural injunctions teach that certain things are to be done and thus presuppose an appropriate sort of agency. But it is not the case that this agency is essential to the soul, because the scriptures teach that one is identical with unconditioned being. The scriptural injunctions presuppose the type of agency that is fabricated by ignorance. Passages such as, 'the agent, the person whose nature is understanding' (Praśna Up. 4.9) refer to the agency fabricated by ignorance.

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 2.3.46

The painful experience of the individual person is not something truly real but is occasioned by a mistaken failure to discriminate between one's true identity and the superimposed properties (mind, body and sense-faculties) that are fabricated by ignorance.

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 3.2.11

Some scriptural passages refer to the *brahman* as possessing differentia (*sa-viśeṣam*), while others say that it lacks differentia (*nirviśeṣam*). Does this mean that the *brahman* has both a conditioned and an unconditioned nature?

Śaṅkara responds that the unconditioned reality cannot intrinsically possess two natures because it is illogical that one and the same reality should both intrinsically have and lack characteristics such as colour and shape. Relation to superimposed properties (*upādhi*) does not involve a change in the real nature of an entity. A brilliant crystal does not become dim by being related to a projected red feature. And the superimposed

properties in relation to the *brahman* are projected by *avidyā*. We must understand that of the two descriptions, the one of the *brahman* as void of every differentia and beyond discursive thought is the true one.

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 3.2.14-15

The *brahman* has no forms (*ākāra*) such as colour and shape. As scripture says, ‘The Brahman is without before and after. There is nothing inside or outside of it. The Brahman is the nature that experiences everything’ (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.5.19). These passages refer to the transcendent (*niṣprapañca*) nature of pure being, so it must be understood that it is formless.

Other scriptural passages that refer to the *brahman* as having form are not primarily about the *brahman*, but are instructions to contemplate the supreme reality in certain ways.

There is no problem about the fact that some texts teach meditation on the *brahman* as having some specific forms. This sort of attribution of characteristics does not compromise our view that the *brahman* does not have a twofold nature although properties are superimposed upon it. When something is due to a superimposed property (*upādhi*), it cannot be a genuine property of an entity. And the superimposed properties are fabricated due to ignorance. We have already explained that primal ignorance is the precondition of all religious and secular dealings.

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 3.2.18

Because the nature of unconditioned pure being is consciousness, void of differentia, beyond mind and language and conveyed by the negation of all finite characteristics, the scriptures teaching freedom from rebirth use the simile of the sun reflected in water, meaning that the *brahman*’s having different features is not the real truth because those features are properties that have been superimposed.

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 3.2.21

Being and consciousness coincide in the *brahman*. They are not distinct properties. The supposition that the *brahman* has a mode of being

that excludes consciousness and another mode that has the form of consciousness that is other than being implies that it is internally complex. Being is just consciousness and consciousness is just being. They are not mutually exclusive, so conceptual analysis (*vikalpa*) about whether the *brahman* is either Being or consciousness or both is groundless. Scriptural texts that speak of the *brahman* under certain forms have their own positive purpose: they do not merely have the significance of denying that finite features of the cosmos pertain to the *brahman*. When features of the cosmos are mentioned in passages enjoining meditation – such as, ‘It is made of mind: the vital breaths are its body; its appearance is light’ – the text does not have the purpose of suppressing plurality but that of enjoining meditation.

The ineffability of the *brahman*

We have seen that one’s true identity as the *brahman*, and the unreality of all differences and individuality, are revealed by some of the scriptures. But the nature of the unconditioned being cannot be expressed by concepts and words. Śaṅkara understands *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.3.6 as referring to the *brahman* and reads the passage as, ‘Now there is the teaching, “It is not this. It is not that.” There is no better expression than “not this.” This is the designation of the truth about reality.’

It expresses something that has no distinguishing features (name, form, actions, differences, class-property or qualities) that are the reasons for the application of words. The *brahman* has no distinguishing features. Therefore it is not possible to describe it as such and such. The *brahman* may be described by means of names, forms and actions that are superimposed upon it. But when we want to express its proper form that is devoid of every specific limiting condition, then it is not possible to describe it in any way. There is only one way left – namely, the designation, ‘Not this, not this’ i.e. by the negation of all possible descriptions.¹³

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 13.12b

‘The highest reality is beginningless. It is not said to be Being or non-Being.’

This text is tremendously influential in the Advaitin tradition. Among other things, it was taken as stating that there can be no continuity of being (*analogia entis*) between the *brahman* and anything belonging to the cosmos. (The formula ‘Inexpressible as being or non-being’ was also applied to *avidyā* and its works.) What Śaṅkara actually says here is that it means that the absolute Being is not the sort of empirical thing that either could or could not exist. It is not an entity on the same level as other entities. It is not knowable by conventional means adapted to our world, but only by Scripture. He also says:

It stands to reason that the unconditioned reality cannot be directly expressed by words such as ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ for words are ordinarily used to reveal some object, and when they are heard they convey a conventional meaning, by expressing the kind to which an object belongs, or some action, quality or relation. Thus ‘cow’ and ‘horse’ express kinds, ‘he cooks’ and ‘he reads’ express actions, ‘white’ and ‘black’ express qualities, and ‘having wealth’ and ‘possessing cows’ express relations. But the *brahman* is not *an entity* that belongs to a kind or class, so it cannot be expressed by words such as ‘being’ or ‘non-being’. Because it is without characteristics, it has no qualities such that it might be expressed by words for them. Because it is unchanging, it cannot be expressed by action-words. Because it is non-relational, unique, non-objectifiable and the Inner nature of all, it cannot be expressed by any word.

What about those Scriptures that speak of the absolute Being in anthropomorphic terms? The answer is:

‘That which is *totally other* than the cosmos is explained by the provisional attribution of features to it, followed by a demonstration that they are inappropriate.’

Śaṅkara and the Buddhists

Śaṅkara and his followers were sometimes described as ‘closet Buddhists’. Buddhists and Advaitins agree that the sense of personal individuality is an illusion, which is created by the interactions between our modes of experiencing and the world. Moreover, like the Buddhists, Śaṅkara envisages the evaporation of personal individuality once enlightenment dawns, and blames suffering on ignorance. But the accusation is far from the truth. Śaṅkara’s metaphysic is totally different from the Buddhist temporalism that rejects the very notion of enduring identities or

substances in favour of successions of phases. Śaṃkara believes that ‘behind’ the array of changing phenomena, there is a single unconditioned reality: the static coincidence of pure being and consciousness. Relative to unconditioned Being (the *brahman*), the world that we experience is less than fully real – not the genuine article – but in the state of liberation (*mokṣa*), what is truly real is enjoyed by consciousness and as consciousness. In other words, the cosmos has a real cause (*sat-kāraṇa-vāda*), even if we must be agnostic about the ontological status of entities that ‘cannot be determined as either real or unreal’. This is because every phenomenon is unreal when mistakenly considered as having its own subsistent, but real in so far as it participates in the general reality or the *brahman*.

Let us see what he says about various Buddhist schools:

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 2.2.18

There are three traditions of Buddhist thought:

Those who say that both material and mental phenomena are real.
[Sarvāstivāda]

Those who say that only mental phenomena are real. [Yogācāra]

Those who say that there are no timeless essences. [Mādhyamaka]

To begin with, we refute those who admit the reality of physical factors as well as minds and ideas. By physical they mean the four elements and the sense faculties as well as their respective objects. They say that earth, water, air and fire are combinations of four different kinds of atoms. The five constituents (*skandhas*) – body, perceptions, feelings, conceptual thoughts and inherited dispositions – make up human lives and underlie all interpersonal dealings.

At this point, it must be said in reply that Buddhist theory about the two different sorts of combinations – that of atoms into material elements and the five constituents into persons – is unintelligible. The argument is:

The atomic components of the material combinations are non-conscious.

The emergence of sentience depends upon the prior existence of some combination.

They do not accept any other persisting conscious subject or director who could combine the basic factors.

It cannot be the case that the atoms and *skandhas* operate spontaneously because that would entail that they would never cease from activity.

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 2.2.19

The Buddhist: Although there is no persisting subject of experience or director who combines the basic factors, the world process is sustained by the interactive causality of factors such as ignorance etc. (*pratītya-samutpāda*). [The factors are] ignorance, habits, perceptions, name and form, the six types of sensation, touch, feeling, grasping, birth, old age and death, sadness, pain, frustration and discontent form a self-perpetuating circle of causes and effects. The reality of those facts of life is accepted by everyone. The cycle of factors, each conditioning the other as effect and cause, presupposes that there are real combinations [such as bodies and mind].

Śaṅkara responds:

You are only talking about the originating causes (*utpatti-mātra nimittatvam*) that connect the elements in the series and overlooking the sort of organizational causality that would account for the formation of combinations. The latter is impossible if there are only momentary atoms and no subjects of experience. Perhaps the factors beginning with ignorance are the causes of the formation of aggregates. But how can they cause that which is the necessary condition of their existence?

Moreover, you do not think that the combinations are formed in the interests of enduring conscious subjects so that they might experience the fruits of their *karma* (*bhogārtham*). Hence, experience is just for the sake of experience and is not sought by anything or anyone else. So freedom from rebirth (*mokṣa*) is just for the sake of itself, and there is no one by whom it is sought. A being with an interest in both experiencing the fruits of action and gaining freedom from rebirth would have to exist contemporaneously with those processes, and such persistence would conflict with your belief in the temporality of beings (*kṣaṇikatva*).

So while there may be a relation of originative causality between the members of the series, this does not suffice to explain their organized combinations. Śaṅkara goes on to establish the stronger claim that the Buddhist position cannot even make sense of originative causality between members of the series. He begins by arguing that a strictly instantaneous reality does not last for long enough to bring about the existence of anything else.

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 2.2.20

The theory that realities are instantaneous implies that when the later moment originates, the earlier one no longer exists. So it is not possible to establish the relation of cause and effect between the two moments. Something that has ceased to be cannot function as a cause. The claim that as soon as a prior moment is fully actualized it becomes the cause of the later one is not intelligible because the hypothesis that a fully actualized entity exercises a causal function (*vyāpāra*) means that it is connected to another moment [which contradicts universal instantaneity].

Nor does it make sense to say that the causal function simply is the existence of the prior entity [and not the exercise of a causal property]. This is because origin of an effect that is not tinged by the nature (*svabhāva*) of its cause is impossible. If one accepts that the effect is tinged by the nature of its cause, the nature of the cause continues in the effect and that entails the abandonment of the hypothesis of instantaneity. Nor can it be argued that there could be a cause–effect relation without the nature of the cause’s influencing the effect, because if that happened there would be chaos.

Moreover, what the Buddhist understands as simultaneous ‘origin and cessation’ would be either the same as the proper form (*svarūpa*) of an entity, or two phases of its existence, or another entity. If they are the same as the proper form, the words ‘origin and cessation’ and ‘entity’ would be synonymous. If the terms ‘origin’ and ‘cessation’ mean two phases that are the beginning and end of an entity whose existence is what occurs between them, the entity would not be instantaneous because it would be connected with three phases – beginning, middle and end.

If origin and cessation are completely different from the entity, then the entity would not be associated with them. It would follow that the entity is everlasting.

The doctrine of momentariness (*kṣaṇikatva*) extends to human personality, which the Buddhists understand as just a series of experiential phases. The doctrine implies the momentariness of the perceiver as the perceived. So there is no enduring principle of identity or soul that unifies the phases and converts them into a continuum. Śaṅkara argues that the phenomenon of memory shows that the Buddhist view is impossible.

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 2.2.25

Moreover, the nihilist (Vaināśika – literally the believer in the spontaneous destructibility of all entities) accepting the instantaneity of everything must apply instantaneity to the subject of experiences. But that is not possible because of the phenomenon first-personal memory [of the form, ‘I remember myself doing that’]. Such memory is produced by the re-occurrence of an experiential awareness, and it is only possible if the one who remembers is the same as the original subject. One man does not remember the awareness of another. How could there be the experience of the awareness ‘I saw that and am seeing it now’ if there were no single subject that sees the earlier and the later? We all know that the experience of recognition occurs only when there is a single subject of both seeing and remembering.... The nihilist knows himself to be the one subject of seeing and remembering whenever he thinks, ‘I saw that’. He does not deny that the past perception belongs to him any more than he denies that fire is hot and light.

Since one and the same agent is connected with the two moments of seeing and remembering, the nihilist must give up his acceptance of the universal temporality of beings. If he recognizes that all his past and future experiences belong to one and the same subject, and accepts that there is sometimes synthetic awareness of both successive and simultaneous cognitions, how can the nihilist who asserts universal instantaneity maintain his position?

The Buddhist may say that recognition and synthetic awareness derive from the similarity of the momentary cognitions [and this generates the misapprehension that there are persisting objects and the illusion that there is an enduring self]. But similarity is a relation between two different things. Someone who says that although there is no single perceiver of two similar things, synthetic awareness is based on similarity is talking

nonsense. If he admits that there is a single perceiver of the similarity between the earlier and later moments, he thereby grants that there is one thing enduring through two moments and this contradicts the hypothesis of instantaneity.

When a universally accepted reality is denied by philosophers, whatever they may say in support of their own view or in finding fault in that of others, they convince neither themselves nor others. When it is known that something is such and such, it must be expressed accordingly. Their thesis about similarity fails to accord with the facts of experience. The act of recognition is an understanding about one and the same thing and not of something that is similar to something else. It may be that sometimes there is a doubt about whether an external object is the same one or something similar to it. But there is no room for doubt about whether the perceiving subject is identical to itself or just something similar.

Śaṅkara now turns his critical attention to the Buddhist ‘consciousness-only’ theory that says that what are usually taken to be physical things outside the mind are really just ideas internal to awareness. Of the basic factors (*dharmas*) posited by the Buddhist schools, they say that only the mental ones are real (*vijñapti-mātra*).

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 2.2.28:

The Buddhist opponent says:

The Enlightened One taught that there really is an external world in consideration of those followers who were convinced about the reality of things external to minds. But this was not his own belief, which was that among the five constituents of personality (*skandhas*), only the perceptions (*vijñāna*) were real. According to the ‘perceptions-only’ theory (*vijñāna-vāda*), we can make sense of everything to do with our cognitive experiences if both the sources and the objects of knowing are purely internal to minds. Even if there were external objects, the process of knowing would not get under way without minds.

But how is it known that this entire process is internal and that there are no objects independent of perceptions?

Because there cannot be external objects. If external objects are accepted, they would be atoms or combinations of atoms, such as pillars. But atoms

are not discerned in our awareness of pillars etc. because they cannot be represented in consciousness. External objects cannot be combinations of atoms because we cannot determine whether they are the same as or different from the atoms. Moreover, although all cognitions have the same nature in that they are consciousness, they may express different objects. This would not happen unless the differentia were internal to awareness, so it must be accepted that a cognition has the same form as its object (*viṣaya-sārūpya*). Once this is granted, given that the representation of the object is determined by cognition (and not the other way round), the postulation of external objects is superfluous. Moreover, given that the object and the awareness of it always occur simultaneously (*sahopalambha-niyamād*), it follows that there is no difference between a cognition and its object. Cognition and its object are always apprehended together. They never occur separately. This would not make sense if the two were different in nature.

Perception of objects is comparable to dreams. Just as ideas in dreams manifest the form of the apprehender and the apprehended although there are no external objects, so in the waking state one must understand that representations of solid objects occur without external objects. This is because from the point of view of felt experience, there is no difference between the forms of awareness.

Now if there are no objects external to minds, how is the variety of representations (*pratyaya-vaicitrya*) explained? It is explained by the variety of residual impressions (*vāsanā-vaicitrya*) left by previous ideas. In the beginningless series of births, an impression causes a perception which in turn leaves an impression, and so on. This explains the variety of representations. Moreover, we understand by reasoning from positive and negative concomitance that the variety of cognitions is just caused by residual impressions. We both admit that in dreams and hallucinations, in the absence of external objects the variety of cognitions is caused by residual impressions. But we do not accept that there can ever be any variety of cognitions without residual impressions. Hence there are no objects external to awareness.

Śaṅkara replies:

It is impossible to make sense of the non-existence of external objects because things are perceived as such. It is the external object – represented in thought – that is perceived. What is being perceived in

this way can't be held not to exist. [Two points implicit here: we are aware of both thoughts and objects as distinct; that perceptual experience is about an external world is a basic phenomenological fact about consciousness.]

The Buddhist may claim, 'I do not say that I am not aware of objects. What I do say is that I am not aware of any object apart from perception.' But objects independent of perception must be accepted simply because of the nature of perception itself. No one perceiving a pillar or a wall is just conscious of a perception. But everyone perceives pillars and walls precisely in so far as they are given in perceptions. Even those who deny the reality of external things implicitly grant their existence when they say that representations internal to consciousness (*antar-jñeya-rūpam*) appear as if external. If we accept that immediate experience is a guide to truth, it is logical to accept that it is precisely something external that is manifested in consciousness, not something that is merely a semblance of the external.

The Buddhist argues that the 'external-like' is what is manifest because of the impossibility of external objects. This can't be right because what is possible and what is impossible is ascertained by the means of knowing (*pramāṇa*), and the means of knowing do not depend on what we might imagine to be possible and impossible. What is possible and what not is understood by the use of some means of knowing. External objects are apprehended as they are in themselves by all the means of knowing. How can it be said that they are not possible on the basis of specious argumentation, given that they are perceived. And it is not the case that there are no external objects because of the conformity between cognitions and objects. If there were no objects, conformity between the representation of the object in awareness and the external object would be impossible. Moreover, the object is represented as external. That is why the co-occurrence of thought and object (*sahopalambha-niyama*) is due to the fact that a relation of mode of presentation and object-presented obtains between thought and object. It does not derive from the identity of thoughts and objects. Moreover, two successive but discrete thoughts, self-illuminating and confined to their own instantaneous occurrences, cannot be related as the subject (*grāhaka*) and the object perceived (*grāhya*). There needs to be a perceiver who witnesses the successive perceptions.

But does this not lead to an infinite regress? If a perception needs illuminating by a perceiver, would not the perceiver need illumination by

something else, and so on? That is why the Buddhist says that each perception is self-illuminating.

[Reply] The problem of an infinite regress does not arise if there is a witness of the perceptions. Since the witness and the ideas are different in nature, they may be related as cognizer and cognized. Moreover, the witness is self-established and undeniable. Self-illuminating perceptions do not reveal anything because they are not manifest to anyone.

How does this differ from the Buddhist theory?

The Buddhist says that perceptions are transient and diverse in nature, while the witness is single and permanent. Hence it is proved that perceptions need a separate witness if they are to mean anything.

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 2.2.29

According to the Vijñānavādin, dreaming shows that we may have experiences (with a subject-object structure) that are phenomenologically indistinguishable from waking ones, in the absence of external objects. Vijñānavādins go further and say that since dreaming and waking are both varieties of conscious experience, what happens in dream experience is the same as what happens in waking experience. The reply appeals to the evidence of the difference between dream experience and waking experience. In short, we have a perspective upon dream experience from the vantage point of waking experience, but the converse does not hold. Dream experiences differ from waking experiences so it is impossible to conclude that waking experiences are false because they share the same nature as dream ones.

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 2.2.30

Turning now to the doctrine that the variety of perceptions is explained by the variety of impressions (*vāsanā*) of prior experiences without reference to external things, it is replied that the Buddhist cannot make sense of the occurrence of the impressions because he does not admit cognitions of external things. If the impressions arise from cognitions of objects, on what basis would the variety of impressions arise if external

things are not perceived. A beginningless series without a starting point would exclude the possibility of everyday life and communication.

Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya 2.2.31

There is the supposition that the storehouse-consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*) is the substratum of the traces. But since that is admitted to be momentary in nature and essentially transient, it cannot be the substrate of impressions. Without a single, stable continuous factor, a witness of all one's experiences, which is connected with past, present and future, ordinary experience involving synthetic acts of memory and recognition that presuppose traces dependent upon times, places and occasions would not be possible.

Further reading

Śaṅkara's *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* is translated in Thibaut (1904). Mayeda (1979) translates the *Upadeśa-Sāhasrī* and has a useful introduction.

Potter (1981) has an introduction and summaries of works by Śaṅkara, as well as Maṇḍana's *Brahma-Siddhi* by Allen Thrasher. The latter's *Advaita Vedānta of Brahma-Siddhi* is stimulating, as are Ram-Prasad (2001 and 2002). Comans (2000) is an illuminating exposition of early Advaita.

Suryanarayana Sastri (1971) translates a classic of Advaita epistemology and metaphysics.

Some aspects of the debates between the Advaitins and theists about scriptural exegesis are described in Bartley, *Theology of Rāmānuja* (2002).

See Granoff (1978) for Śrī Harṣa.

For Bhartṛhari, see John Brough's classic essays on 'Theories of General Linguistics in the Sanskrit Grammarians' and 'Some Indian Theories of Meaning' in Hara and Wright (1996). Also Matilal (1991).

For Gauḍapāda, see V. Bhattacharya, *The Agamaśāstra of Gauḍapāda*. See King (1995), for connections with Buddhism.

For an account of a modern articulation of the Advaitic outlook, see Bartley (2013) on Radhakrishnan.

Questions for discussion and investigation

1. In what senses is Advaita subversive of mainstream orthodoxy? Does it represent the implicit rejection of Hindu *dharma*?
2. Why would anyone suppose that Śaṅkara was a closet Buddhist?

Notes

1. Parts of this chapter draw on material in my article 'Advaita and the Schools of Vedānta' (Bartley 2011).
2. See Bhattacharya, V. (1989).
3. Nemec (2011), pp. 146–210.
4. Advaita is informed by Scriptures such as 'At first the world was just being, one only without a second' (Ch.Up. 6.2.1), 'I am the *brahman*' (BAU. 1.4.10), 'This whole world is the *brahman*' (Ch.Up. 3.14.1), and 'Whatever is the finest essence, that is the true nature of everything, that is authentic reality, and that is what you are (*tat tvam asi*)' (Ch.Up. 6.8.7).
5. Dumont (1980), Appendix B: 'World Renunciation in Indian Religions', and Biardeau (1997).
6. *The Bhagavad Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, pp. 2 and 4.
7. Fort (1998).
8. Bartley (2002), Ch. 4.
9. These questions are illuminatingly treated in a series of publications by the late Paul Hacker. See Halbfass (1995), Ch. 4.
10. His doctrine is what Paul Hacker called a 'radical ontologism'. See Halbfass (1995), pp. 198–9.
11. *Vedāntaparibhāṣā*, p. 37: *Pariṇāma* means producing an effect of the same degree of reality as its causal substrate. *Vivarta* means producing an effect whose reality is inferior to that of the causal substrate. The source is Appaya Dīkṣita's *Siddhāntaleśasaṃgraha*, p. 67.
12. v. supra Ch. 4.
13. *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad with Śaṅkara's Commentary*, Agase (1891) pp. 315–16.

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