

The Ground of Being/Non-Being, and the Divine Self: Śaṅkara on *brahman* and Kṛṣṇa

We will now inquire into the nature of *brahman* in Śaṅkara's commentary. The critical hermeneutic point about his commentary is that he chose to do it all: Śaṅkara was perhaps the first to comment on the *Gītā*, and it is striking that he should have engaged with a text that could, if we go by his commentaries on the *Brahmasūtras* and (especially) the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads*, be at odds with his austere metaphysics. In those texts, he interprets the ancient identification of *brahman* and *ātman* as a fundamental absence of difference between the reflexive consciousness that is the core of *ātman* and the universally constitutive consciousness (*cit*) that is at least one – phenomenologically and gnoseologically significant – characterisation of ineffable *brahman*. His system, then, is to work out the way in which the multitudinous actuality of ordinary experience – the plural loci of consciousness that is humanity and all living creatures, and the physical diversity of the world that they inhabit – can be read in terms of this ultimate non-duality of an all-pervasive and all-constituting consciousness.

Śaṅkara does not give up this overarching metaphysics: we will return to the question of the plurality of beings and the physical presentation of the world in which beings find themselves. But the challenge that is posed to him in undertaking a commentary on the *Gītā* is the presence of Kṛṣṇa at the heart of the narrative. In simple terms, what is God doing here? And of course, those are simple terms indeed, for what 'God' means and how Kṛṣṇa is that 'God' are questions that can be answered only by going through Śaṅkara's actual treatment of the *Gītā*. But the tension between a sweeping metaphysics and an inescapable theology is what provides the hermeneutic energy to his commentary; and furthermore, there is the intriguing fact that he chose to so comment, and indeed, render the *Gītā* one of the three sources

(*prasthānatrayī*) of all subsequent Vedānta schools. There could, of course, be historical reasons for why he chose to do so, but I want to argue that, in any case, the result is a subtle and indirect account of God and reality that is not quite ontotheological and only in some respects a form of mystical ontologism. Given this, it would be unwise to start with a translation of ‘*brahman*’, any translation being already an interpretation; so, let the meanings accrete as we look at what he has to say about the nature of *brahman*.

Brahman in excess of being and non-being: On what there is and is not

On how things and being are non-existent (*sensu strictu*)

Śaṅkara first mentions *brahman* at the end of the long commentary on 2.16. This verse says: ‘For that which is non-existent (*asat*), no being (*bhāva*) is found; for that which is existent (*sat*), no non-being (*abhāva*) is found. But the core (*antaḥ*) of both of these has indeed been seen by the seers of reality.’¹ Śaṅkara leads up to talk of *brahman* through an exploration of the key terms in this verse. He starts by reading ‘being’ (*bhāva*) from the root word √bhu, as ‘coming into being’ (*bhavanam*), as also ‘isness’ or ‘presence’ (*astitā*). This way, we get to the meaning of ‘the existent’ (*sattā*), derived from the root word √as from which is generated ‘is’ (*asti*) and thence, ‘isness’ (*astitā*). These grammatical moves, of course, indicate the start of his presentation of a radical metaphysics.

The existent – that which is – (*sattā*) is the universal category (*sāmānya*) of generic existence, derived in the Nyāya school in the centuries preceding Śaṅkara; it is what medieval Western thought calls the *ens commune*, the general fact that beings are. Śaṅkara’s claim is that for there to be such a general category of isness, is for any entity to be infused by being. So he clearly distinguishes between the isness of beings and being as such, that by which such isness is rendered. In that sense, from the beginning, it is clear that he is aware of the distinction between ontology – the classification of entities based on their isness – and being as such, that by which entities are beings. This is important when we come to what he has to say about Kṛṣṇa’s being and Kṛṣṇa as being as such.

Being – which can also be a coming into being, presence, and therefore, that which renders existence – is contrasted with non-being, i.e., those entities which may be called, ultimately, non-existent. But what he calls non-being is startling: for all things are non-being. But this is neither solipsism nor even idealism; for rather, Śaṅkara wants to attach a particular meaning to being, derived from his understanding of being as such. He says

of all things present to us that they are changeful (*vikāra*), and whatever is changeful deviates (*vyabhicarati*) from what it appears to be to our awareness. This conclusion, he maintains, is available even through standard epistemological requirements. The means of knowledge (the *pramāṇa* system) like perception and inference, are expected to give us a grasp of what things really are. But such essence of existence (*vastu sat*) is never obtainable ... for things constantly change. So epistemological standards direct us to an understanding of epistemic limits. The pot comes out and goes back to earth, and so all things and their material cause shift and change (for earth itself must have a further material cause, and it too shifts and changes in its presentation). So, he asks himself, does this imply nihilism? Could all be non-being (*sarvābhāva*)? No; it can always be understood that there are two apprehensions – the apprehension of existence, and the apprehension of non-existence. That regarding which apprehension does not deviate, exists; that regarding which apprehension deviates, does not exist. Thus, the distinction between existence and non-existence rests on the faculty of apprehension (*buddhitānta*); in all cases, there are two apprehensions.²

Śaṅkara goes on to draw out what these two apprehensions are. Objects (*viśayaḥ*) of apprehension are changeful: in the cognition, '[this is a] blue lotus', the 'blue' is a quality and 'lotus' the qualificand, and both change. In cognitions such as 'the pot exists', existence is not a quality of the pot, so that, while the pot may change, existence as such does not.³ The apprehension of being does not change in the way apprehension of objects does. Pots (*ghaṭāḥ*) and cloths (*paṭāḥ*) may come and go, and so our apprehension of them ceases when they do. 'But apprehension of existence does not [cease] with the absence of objects' (*na tu sadbuddheḥ viśayābhāvāt*). He goes on to say: 'Thus of the non-existent, the body and the binaries [such as heat and cold, etc.] together with their causes, it is said that there is no being. Then, the existent is the self, which is not non-being, for it is always non-deviating; this is what we say.'⁴ (We will, of course, return to self later in this chapter; and in even greater detail in the chapter on Self).

Śaṅkara here is not seeking to investigate the nature of objects, that is to say, how one distinguishes between different elements of the order of things, or how one uses epistemic instruments to determine the difference between water and mirage. Rather, he brackets the whole question of entities and their individual natures, and attempts to get to the very fact that there are things in all their diversity presented to and in our awareness. That being-there (as pots and bodies and coloured lotuses) of these things is existence itself, while the way they are is not-existence. Consciousness grasps both simultaneously, but to be ever-aware in consciousness of this duality – a strange and virtual duality to be sure – of being and non-being, is the attainment of the seers

(*darśinah*) of thatness (*tattva*). For them, the core (*antaḥ*) of the teaching is the certainty (*nirṇayaḥ*) that this is so. ‘That (*tat*) is the name of all, all is *brahman*; its name is “That” (*tat*). The manner of being (*tadbhāvaḥ*) of “that” is thatness, the as-it-is-hood (*yāthātmyam*) of *brahman*.⁵ In this swift yet indirect way, Śaṅkara gets to *brahman*. *Brahman* is the way in which beings have their being. What renders being as it is, is *brahman*. We begin to understand that there is an intimate connection between *brahman* and being, given how Śaṅkara interprets being.⁶ But *brahman*’s connection is with non-being too; as we will see soon, for Śaṅkara, *brahman* is in excess of both being (that is to say, what is called Being in Christian and Heideggerian writing) and non-being (including the entitative nature of beings in the world). But before we turn to that, let us look a little more closely at the somewhat strange thought that the world as it is found in apprehension is non-existent, i.e., is non-being. We will see later that ontology itself is radically circumscribed for Śaṅkara, as there is nothing other than *brahman*. What is to be noted here is that he draws the line between being and non-being, not by way of subjective and objective states (where a metaphysical realist might say that the latter is being and an idealist that it is the former that is being), but by distinguishing between the changeful and the permanent.

For Śaṅkara, the changeful is perishable, mutation being the destruction of identity. Strictly speaking, every entity whose identity is given by changeable qualities is non-existent. Clearly, Śaṅkara is not talking of non-existence in the terms of an ontology. He is not stating that water is existent and a mirage not, or perception is real and its objects not. Rather, he is talking of ontology *tout court*. All things, being changeful, are non-being, while what is not changeful is being itself. In commenting on 15.16 – which is about selves – he returns to the strict construal of being as that which is imperishable. 15.16 talks of two groups of persons, the perishable and the imperishable, and goes on to say, ‘the perishable is all beings (*kṣaraḥ sarvāṇi bhūtāni*); the immutable (*kūṭastha*) is the imperishable’. Śaṅkara’s exegesis here ingeniously works in his distinction between being and non-being through the categories of the immutable and the changeful. ‘The immutable is a group that is [made up of] a heap, is stable as in a group. Or the heap is an illusion, a deception, crookedness, trickery, which are synonymous ... it is called the imperishable because, due to the countless seeds of worldly existence, it does not perish.’⁷ Śaṅkara therefore limits existence, in the strict sense, to the constancy of being as such (‘Being’ – which I hesitate to use, for capitals carry their own implications in contrast to Sanskrit words, where they do not occur), in contrast to changeful beings, presented to themselves (as persons) or in apprehension as objects. The Heideggerian parallel is the distinction between ‘presencing’ and ‘presence’.⁸ Later we will see what Śaṅkara means when he says the immutable (the ‘presence’, as it were) is illusion.

Brahman in excess of being and non-being

So we see that the existent is being as such, not particular beings. Being is the thatness of all, not any particular thing amongst the all. But is thatness – the constancy of being as such – itself *brahman*? It is not easy to come to a simple conclusion about the metaphysical relationship between *brahman* and thatness. If, naturally, we take ‘That’ to be ‘Being’ (being as such, as opposed to the being (*bhāva*) of things and persons), we get the formulation that ‘Being’ is the name of *brahman*. But, having the option of equating *brahman* with Being, we have seen that, under 2.16, Śaṅkara chooses not to. Indeed, in the passage from 15.16 just quoted, he even equates the imperishable – the heap that as a whole is immutable – with the illusory. Later, we will see how he undercuts the metaphysics of what is not *brahman*, so that *brahman* is not other than what it is not. But first, we must look at another of Śaṅkara’s moves: *brahman* exceeds both being-as-such/the imperishable/the immutable/the existent/the unmanifest, as well as non-being/the perishable/the changeful/the non-existent/the manifest. Let us look at how, while distinguishing between being and non-being, Śaṅkara also talks of the excession (*paramatva*) of *brahman*.

Śaṅkara draws on the *Gītā*’s repeated use of the distinction between the unmanifest (*avyakta*) and the manifest (*vyakta*) and maps them on to the binary of being and non-being – being is the unmanifest, non-being is the manifest. This equation is not puzzling. Being as such is never individuated in awareness, never manifests itself, while what is manifest is always the particularity of beings. In that context, he notes 8.18’s statement that all manifest things emerge (*prabhavanti*) from the unmanifest at the break of cosmic day; this is the source of beings in this world, into which the multitude of beings (*bhūtagrāmaḥ*) dissolve (*praliyante*) in the cosmic night. Then he points to the next verse: ‘But exceeding this is the other eternal, unmanifest state of being, unmanifest of the unmanifest; and that, when all beings are lost, is not destroyed.’⁹ Its exceeding the unmanifest he glosses as its being distinct (*vyatiriktaḥ*) and different (*bhinnah*) from the unmanifest. This state of being (*bhāvaḥ*) is the imperishable (*akṣara*), *brahman in excelsis* (*param brahman*). The unmanifest state of being is the seed of the multitude of beings (*bhūtagrāmabījabhūta*). *Brahman* contains – or rather, is – the possibility of being, and therefore it is beyond both the unmanifest from which the manifest arises, and the manifest that does so arise. Śaṅkara recognises that it is necessary to both (i) indicate *brahman*’s exceeding being and non-being, and (ii) take being as such (or Being) to derive from it. Commenting on the chapter on the Vision of the Cosmic Form, he notes Arjuna’s saying of Kṛṣṇa in the midst of the theophanic event, at 11.37, ‘You are the imperishable, existent, non-existent, and what exceeds that’.¹⁰ On this,

Śaṅkara says, the existent and the non-existent are merely a contingency (*upādhi*) of *brahman*, and therefore it comes to be referred to metaphorically (*upacārāt*) as existent/non-existent. In the ultimate sense, it exceeds existence/non-existence (*paramārthastu sadasatoḥ param*).

Even while offering a metaphysics – being and non-being, what count as one or the other, and why – Śaṅkara strives towards what may be called a transmetaphysics, an exhaustion of the limits of discursive understanding of our phenomenological being so that what lies beyond our own being is realized in our being.

We have, then, two movements by Śaṅkara with regard to *brahman* and being. The first is that *brahman* is other than both the manifest (non-being) and unmanifest (being), i.e., different not only from the strictly non-existent world represented in apprehension, and also from its seed or that from which being comes into such representation in apprehension. The second move is to maintain, however, that all is *brahman* and that *brahman* is not other than the manifest and the unmanifest. We have, then, the world of beings which is not-being as such; and we have being as such under all the changing world of beings. The former is not real, the latter is indicative of the real. *Brahman* is neither of them, yet there is nothing other than *brahman*. For now, I hope we can begin to see why choosing a translational term for *brahman* is neither easy nor sensible.

Speaking of Kṛṣṇa and Kṛṣṇa speaking of Himself

Now we must turn to the very framing of the *Gītā*, for it is a curious locale for an exploration of *brahman* as Śaṅkara conceives it. For Kṛṣṇa, who is a specific being in this world, the enigmatic charioteer and cousin who speaks to Arjuna, the person present on the battlefield, also says that that *brahman* is his ‘support’ (*pratiṣṭha*). How so?

This is the central theological challenge of Śaṅkara’s reading of the *Gītā*: the inescapability of a divine person who speaks and is spoken to throughout. In other commentaries, Śaṅkara has the freedom to sustain an inquiry into *brahman* as the metaphysical exploration of all dimensions of the existence of consciousness. The *Gītā* centres on Kṛṣṇa – not only what is said to and of him by Arjuna and of him by Sañjaya, but in a significant sense, what is said by Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna (and us). We will see in the next chapter how theologically effective Rāmānuja found this divine directness, but for Śaṅkara it presents a different challenge. As we have just seen, there is a vast and complex task on hand for him, namely, an exploration of how *brahman* is to be understood in all and as all. But this is to be approached only through

the persona of Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā*. No quick answer is available as to what Śaṅkara does in his commentary in response to this exegetical situation. The quick answer that we must not be tempted by is that Śaṅkara, uninterested in the divine person who is Kṛṣṇa, sought to simply subordinate theology to philosophical metaphysics, leaving a personal god as a prop for the gnoseologically challenged, while all the while striving for an understanding of an impersonal absolute. Perhaps this is true of other commentaries; perhaps there is a germ of truth in it with regard to this commentary. But no more than a germ, for given many opportunities to simply read Kṛṣṇa as a formal symbol of limited understanding, Śaṅkara does not quite do so. In other words, we should not think that the task before Śaṅkara is somehow to get around the fact of Kṛṣṇa's first-personal presence in order that he can work out the universality of *brahman*. The more painstaking task that Śaṅkara takes up is to read the former in such a way as to make it an integral part of the latter.

Kṛṣṇa first invokes divinity in first-personal terms at 3.22, 'In all the three worlds, Pārtha [Arjuna], there is nothing at all yet to be done by me; nothing remains unachieved or to be achieved, and yet I continue to act'.¹¹ From then on, he gradually discloses himself in the *Gītā*, becoming ever-clearer about his divine selfhood in chapter 10, preparatory to the cosmic vision he provides in chapter 11. Thereafter, while he continues his teaching, its reception is imbued with our knowledge that Arjuna has been transformed by his vision. In comparativist perspective, this disclosure could not be more radically different than the Mosaic God of the burning bush who is said to say at Exodus 3.14: *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* (I am the Being, I am who I am, I will be that I will be, I am that I am). Now, Śaṅkara does not face the direct and deep mystery of what an aniconic God's apparently tautological first-personal description can mean. In the *Gītā*, the first-personal speaker says at great length – rather than in an enigmatic pinpoint – what 'I am. Rather than permitting description to collapse into the mystery of divine self-proclamation, the *Gītā* allows it to flourish exuberantly, seeking to exhaust language in order to indicate the divine presence Who is in excess of language. In this, it more naturally follows the *via eminentiae*, relating qualities that spring from the human – in the automatic sense that they are expressed in language, pre-eminently or perfectly in Kṛṣṇa.¹² The striking point, in comparativist terms, is not so much that Arjuna so approaches Kṛṣṇa but that the text takes Kṛṣṇa to describe himself in this manner. And the more detailed this descriptions, the more challenging it may seem for Śaṅkara to relate this proliferation – naturally personalistic, because derived by definition from qualities understandable only by virtue of being human – to *brahman*.

Śaṅkara has to work out how Kṛṣṇa – robustly limited as the very specific being at the heart of the narrative, using language (even at its limits), necessarily structured in his disclosure through the grammatical imperative of the first person – can yet advert to *brahman* as Śaṅkara understands it. How to handle this being who speaks not just of being but what permits being as such, to be – and identifies himself thus?

The *Gītā* does not – whether problematically or helpfully – allow easy identification of Kṛṣṇa and *brahman* or smooth passage between (the confusing if conventional categories of) the personal and the impersonal. Where Kṛṣṇa declares anything about himself in relation to *brahman*, much depends on how he is read; and indeed, the vivid contrasts between Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja on the divine self turn on such exegetical divergence. But Kṛṣṇa does not call himself *brahman* as such in the *Gītā* itself; of course, saying that Kṛṣṇa is *brahman* is nothing notable, for *brahman* is all. So what he means in relation to *brahman* is something Śaṅkara has to bring out through his glossing of relational terms. Śaṅkara uses a range of names for Kṛṣṇa, some directly found in the *Gītā* which he uses freely, and others derived from the tradition that developed in the intervening centuries, by which Kṛṣṇa was identified with Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa. Kṛṣṇa is *īśvara*, a term drawing on root meanings of capability and sovereignty, and therefore most familiarly translated as ‘God’; and also, *maheśvara*, ‘great God’ – sometimes implying a distinction from other (smaller) gods but, dominantly, indicating maximal ownership of divine qualities. He is also *bhagavat* (a term used earlier for the Buddha), with a root meaning of ‘the dispenser’ or ‘patron’, and usually translated as ‘the Lord’. Then there are the epithets for Kṛṣṇa that arise from the narrative surrounding the *Gītā*, where he is Vāsudeva (the son of Vāsudeva) and the like. There is, then, not only the task of interpreting the first-personal uses of Kṛṣṇa about himself where he adverts to his divinity, but also the second-personal uses by Arjuna in describing him. Kṛṣṇa speaking of himself and Arjuna speaking of Kṛṣṇa, both provide opportunities for talking of God (or rather, translationally, what ‘God’ means); the question is how such talk relates to the *brahman* with which Śaṅkara is concerned.

Generally, Śaṅkara uses two hermeneutical tactics to get to *brahman* via Kṛṣṇa’s first-personally articulate presence. First, he notes the rare occasions on which Kṛṣṇa says he is the *ātman*; and much more often, emphasises many of Kṛṣṇa’s self-declarations by identifying him with *ātman* or the supreme self (*paramātman*). Second, he often uses a locution when talking of Kṛṣṇa – ‘God, called Nārāyaṇa’ (*nārāyaṇākhyam*) or ‘*brahman*, called Vāsudeva (*brahmavāsudevākhyam*)’ – that inserts an awareness of the necessary limitation of language in the usage of a name (*nāma*), even the name of God. Let us look at these in turn.

Let us provisionally understand the ‘self’ as the abstract, core or inner consciousness. It is the linguistic signifier of the subject that renders inquiry

meaningful and possible. It is through there being self that there is both the misunderstanding of the nature of being and the capacity for realizing the way that there is being at all. It is, to start with, who is. In 7.18, Kṛṣṇa declares that the cognisant one (*jñāni*) is 'verily self' (*ātmaiva*). Here Śaṅkara explicates the implicit reflexivity: he glosses it as 'not another' (*nānyaḥ*). This would be emptily tautological, if we did not consider the import of 'self' here. The cognisant one, he explains, focuses on the thought, 'I myself am the Lord Vāsudeva, none else'.¹³ Therefore, the true implication of self – the only self that is self – is Kṛṣṇa. Seen this way, Kṛṣṇa's statement in the following verse, that the cognisant one realizes that 'Vāsudeva is all (*sarvaṃ*)' indicates that such a one 'realises me as the self of all'.¹⁴ Later, at 10.20, Kṛṣṇa says, 'I am self, Guḍākeśa [The Thick-Haired One, Arjuna], dwelling as the resting-place of all beings'.¹⁵ Śaṅkara reads *ātman* here as the innermost self (*pratyagātma*), by which time we have become habituated to his repeated (and anticipatory) equation of Kṛṣṇa with *ātman*. As we explore the use and range of *ātman*, we will gradually come to see the universal scope of this equation.

The rigorous selfhood of Kṛṣṇa is driven home in the brief commentary on 7.20, where Kṛṣṇa says that people deprived of wisdom 'resort to other deities' (*prapadyante 'nyadevatāḥ*): Śaṅkara expands this as 'resort to deities other than (*anyāt*) Vāsudeva who is self (*vāsudevād ātmanaḥ*)'. The hierarchy of deities emerging in the composition of the *Gītā* is not the point here for Śaṅkara;¹⁶ the distinction between the gods of ritual worship and Kṛṣṇa comes through the latter's identity with the selfhood of all who worship in the first place. The source of the possibility of worship is the subject who worships; and that subject is – although not in any experientially or linguistically transparent way – Kṛṣṇa. All other deities (*devatāḥ*) are objects of worship, and therefore elements of that world, different from and yet not-other than *brahman*/self/Kṛṣṇa.

Kṛṣṇa, then, is centred by Śaṅkara through the identification with self, so that Kṛṣṇa's 'I' preserves layers of meaning that peel away to reveal the very notion of self – the self of all. Śaṅkara's tactic is to take Kṛṣṇa's speaking of himself at face value, not challenging the routine self-proclamation of a personal God but reading it as the mapping of self on self. Kṛṣṇa as self becomes the key that unlocks Kṛṣṇa's self-statement of divinity. At 7.24, Kṛṣṇa says, "The unintelligent think of me as having become manifest even though I am unmanifest, not knowing of my being in the highest, which is immutable and unsurpassable."¹⁷ Śaṅkara explains this as the undiscriminating (*avivekinaḥ*) not being aware of my being in the highest, that is, my being of 'the very form of the highest self' (*paramātmavarūpaṃ*) – free of mutability (*vyayarahita*), none more eminent (*niratiśaya*) – taking me to be the hidden (*aprakāśa*) that has become the revealed now (*prakāśaṃ gatam idānīm*), although I am 'the ever-established' (*nityaprasiddha*) God

(*iśvara*). Śaṅkara therefore asserts the greatest intimacy possible between us and another – that of identity. Dull-wittedly, people interpret the physical presence of Kṛṣṇa in that time as a manifestation of the hidden God, an interpretation in whose narrative sequence the ontological distance of otherness between divine and human is always preserved. But the God who is in excess of both visible and invisible being (as we have already noted in the first section) is the supreme construal of selfhood, for self is nothing to become known – as in the third-personal story of a manifest God hitherto hidden – but that which is always and unquestionably established for itself.

There is one wrinkle that Śaṅkara has to iron out. Śaṅkara in other works argues that *ātman* is not picked out by ‘I’ (*aham*), as all such linguistic usage generates mistaken identification with something which is mine (*mama*), so that the sheer subjective presence of unitary consciousness that is *ātman* is ever deferred in its own awareness; this has implications for the conception of self that we will explore in detail in the chapter on Self.¹⁸ Yet, of course, the *Gītā* is full of such usage by Kṛṣṇa, which Śaṅkara ought, for the sake of consistency, to condemn as the proliferation of egoity (literally, the ‘I’-maker or *ahamkāra*), which generates mistaken conceptions of who one is. Śaṅkara has no option but to explain this (away), in the commentary for 9.5. ‘How, again, does he say, “This is my self”? Following worldly understanding, separating the body and other aggregations, and then superimposing egoity, he talks of “my self”; but this is not as if he takes self to be other than self as the worldly ignorant do.’¹⁹ First-personal usage by Kṛṣṇa is a necessary locution to advert to self; this is not a license for us to persist in our mistaken identification of the psychophysical apparatus with self. Kṛṣṇa appears, because of the grammar of teaching, to preserve the individuatedness that limits self-talk to each locus of awareness in our worldliness; but the consciousness in Kṛṣṇa is ever-free of mistaken individuatedness. Once we understand this, we are able to take in his teaching, which is that Kṛṣṇa’s self is our self. The individuation is the linguistic consequence of our psychophysical limitation, while Kṛṣṇa’s teaching points us towards the liberating awareness of the universality of self. Kṛṣṇa, then, is self, and Kṛṣṇa’s expression of self is selfhood *par excellence*. Pre-eminently, Kṛṣṇa’s self-talk adverts to what is truly self. In this way, Śaṅkara negotiates the path from the self-proclaimed presence of a personal God to the inquiry into the ways of being, not through any obvious subordination of the former to the latter, but as integral and pedagogically critical aspects of the same gnostic inquiry. Still, this alerts us to the fact that the theologically significant presence of Kṛṣṇa is nevertheless only part of a larger project, and not – as we will see with Rāmānuja – the goal of the project itself.

The second tactic is found in Śaṅkara’s curious formulation, ‘called Vāsudeva’ – one might even say, ‘so-called Vāsudeva’. In the Introduction itself (p. 3), he offers a potent précis of how he will approach the whole matter

of the *Gītā*. This sacred text, he says, reveals (*abhivyañjayat*) the supreme reality (*paramārthatattvaṃ*), called Vāsudeva (*vāsudevākhyam*), the being that signifies (*abhidheyabhūtaṃ*) *brahman* in the highest (*parabrahman*) as its subject matter (*viśeṣataḥ*). We will explore the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and *brahman* later, in section 6; but for now, let us note the first occurrence of this locution, ‘called Vāsudeva’. Why not, we can ask ourselves, just ‘Vāsudeva, the supreme reality’? (Rāmānuja conspicuously does not use this locution.) In another instance, at 10.08, Kṛṣṇa declares, ‘I am the source of all’ (*aham sarvasya prabhavaḥ*); and Śaṅkara glosses ‘I’ as ‘the supreme *brahman* called Vāsudeva’ (p. 150).

At first, we may think that this is indicative of an apophatic move – calling him ‘Vāsudeva’ does not actually name God, it is only a name that we use for God, as too ‘Nārāyaṇa’ and the like. So one might think that Śaṅkara is indicating that God escapes naming; God alone properly uses the ‘I’ (*aham*),²⁰ but when we attempt to describe him, we are left with names, which we give. But there is nothing else in what Śaṅkara says that suggests that he was concerned specifically with the unnameability of Kṛṣṇa. This is because of the extremely significant fact that Kṛṣṇa speaks in the first person in the *Gītā*; he has, as it were, named himself for us. It is God’s declaration that he is so named; we begin with it. So we must look for some other explanation for Śaṅkara’s locution.

My suggestion is that the locution points to something deeper than the limitation of our speaking of God. It points to the limitation of God as that of which we speak. We speak here of God (Kṛṣṇa, Nārāyaṇa, Vāsudeva), so-called. What we speak of is God – for speaking of God is the extent to which we can speak of *brahman*; profoundly, we cannot speak of *brahman* as such. God becomes the way language mediates consciousness’ understanding of itself (self that it is) as *brahman*. God is, of course, *brahman*; there is nothing other than *brahman*, a thought to which we will turn in the next section. We may provisionally attach the name of ‘God’ to *brahman*, but, strictly speaking, we cannot really name and describe *brahman* as such; we can only realize it as self. We must be careful here, as I do not want to lurch back to one conventional understanding of Śaṅkara, namely that he thinks God is a limitation, a distraction, a construct to be transcended – in the *Gītā*, at any rate, he makes no such move. What I am trying to say is that Śaṅkara uses the locution, ‘so-called’, to indicate how the phenomenological inquiry into *brahman* towards which the exegetical authority of the *Gītā* points (which we will explore in pages 19–28) is made possible only through language, and Kṛṣṇa is the self-signifier of the promise that such inquiry can be undertaken.

In these two ways, then, Śaṅkara indicates how Kṛṣṇa is central to the non-duality of self and *brahman*, of God and *brahman*, and world and

brahman. It is in the light of these ideas that we can understand an occasion where Śaṅkara brings the two tactics together. At 10.8, where Kṛṣṇa says ‘I am the origin (*prabhava*) of all’, he glosses the ‘I’ as ‘supreme *brahman*, called Vāsudeva.’²¹

Who and/or what is God? Śaṅkara’s Kṛṣṇa theology

The two broad tactics considered in the previous section can therefore be identified as Śaṅkara’s reading of Kṛṣṇa within his exposition of *brahman* (*brahmavāda*). They are meant to permit Kṛṣṇa’s declarations to be received theologically, but without disturbing Śaṅkara’s understanding of *brahman* as the *terminus ad quem* of the non-dualist task. But, for the purposes of enunciating a theory of *brahman* (which is also a guide to the re/attainment of *brahman* by the theorist and his adherents), the *Gītā* is a difficult text. It has to be read, first and foremost, on its own terms as offering a theology of Kṛṣṇa. Śaṅkara does not seek to discard, or even deflect the theological promise on offer. It is only obliquely that we come to see what he does with the theology, in its location within a *brahmavāda*. So, we must first look at how Śaṅkara reads the theology of Kṛṣṇa. Understanding how Śaṅkara understands Kṛṣṇa will help locate Kṛṣṇa within Śaṅkara’s theory of *brahman* (*brahmavāda*), not just as something he had to attend to (perhaps for the historical reason that Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu and the *Gītā* had become too important to ignore) but as vital to his exploration of reality. In this section, we will discuss various things that Kṛṣṇa says about himself in the *Gītā* and how Śaṅkara receives him theologically.

Śaṅkara does not see Kṛṣṇa as a creator god, a being whole and distinct before there is creation, bringing beings and things into existence *ex nihilo*, and continuing to have a being distinct from all beings thus created. He reads Kṛṣṇa’s statements about his power in relation to beings and things in a way that does not challenge Kṛṣṇa’s divinity, yet subtly re-presents it within a metaphysics of non-duality. At 7.4–5, Kṛṣṇa talks of his evolutive nature (*prakṛti*)²² as having an inferior (*aparā*) and a superior (*para*) form. The former is material and includes the elements, as well as the mind (*manas*) and the ‘I-maker (*ahaṁkāra*), which is to say, the physical conditions of individuation. The latter consists in the individual beings (*jīvaḥ*), by which the world is upheld. Śaṅkara accepts these declarations with only a little exposition. He glosses Kṛṣṇa’s mention of ‘this other, higher nature of mine’ (*tvanyām prakṛtim*) as ‘my pure, self-being’ (*viśuddhām mamātmabhūtām*) (p. 118), so that the individual beings are taken as not other than Kṛṣṇa’s own being. This then casts the next verse, in which Kṛṣṇa

says he is the womb or origin (*yoni*) of all beings and their birth (*prabhava*) and dissolution (*pralaya*), in a rather different metaphysical light; for what Kṛṣṇa is saying is therefore not to be understood as a story of creation and destruction of beings separate from him, but a cosmogonic narrative of the self-expression of being itself, in its coming forth in a manifold of individuation and its going back to being alone (pure Being, being as such, being beyond the phenomenology of individuated beings).

Kṛṣṇa says soon after, at 7.13–14, that people are deluded by the qualitative diversity of the world in which they find themselves, and this manifold (*māyā*) becomes difficult for them to go beyond; therefore, Kṛṣṇa says, they ‘cross over’ (*taranti*) by taking refuge in him. Śaṅkara does not here directly take up *māyā*’s metaphysical status according to Advaita, as the phenomenal appearance of changeful things that is less-than-real (*mithyā*), a construal that Rāmānuja, of course, would later explicitly rule out. Here, Śaṅkara’s aim is to identify precisely what it is about Kṛṣṇa that prompts our seeking refuge in him; and yet again he does this by saying who and what the Kṛṣṇa is who speaks thus of himself. The ‘I’ of Kṛṣṇa, he says, refers to ‘the conjuring master of *māyā*, the being that is itself the self of all.’²³ (It should also be added that he reads ‘to take refuge’ (*prapadyante*) to be ‘to forsake all ritually enjoined action’ (*sarvadharmān parityajya*); its full significance we will explore in the last chapter’s consideration of 18.66, but we can see that this austere and disciplinary gloss is an unobvious way to understand the devotional implications of taking refuge.) Without denying Kṛṣṇa’s theological claim, Śaṅkara nevertheless presents what is going on in these verses as essentially a gnoseological project of self-realization expressed through the mediating reality of Kṛṣṇa.

Śaṅkara’s theology of Kṛṣṇa therefore is not some simple denial or even marginalisation of theology itself: nowhere in the *Gītābhāṣya* does he suggest that God is a conceptual construct driven by human need; he does not even say that God – Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa – is the provisional goal of the cognitively underdeveloped, a sort of culturally conditioned penultimate absolute. At the same time, Kṛṣṇa is not the culminating point of his inquiry; nor is a devotional love of God the ultimate human mode of fulfilment. Let us look further at his treatment of Kṛṣṇa, especially Kṛṣṇa’s self-declarations, before we sum up what Śaṅkara takes Kṛṣṇa to be.

Śaṅkara takes no particular pains to articulate or defend a monotheistic conception of Kṛṣṇa, but despite talking easily of the various deities mentioned in the *Gītā*, at one point he makes a brief yet emphatic statement about monotheism. In amidst the great series of overflowing exaltations of the theophany in chapter 11, Arjuna says at 11.43, ‘There is no one like you’ (*na tvat samoṣṭi*). Śaṅkara goes beyond just glossing ‘like’ as ‘equal to’ (*tulya*):

'It is not possible for there to be two Gods, for worldly doing (*vyavahāra*) would fail if there were many Gods!'²⁴ This is not in itself an argument for a monotheistic conception of God, but it flows naturally from Śaṅkara's understanding of Kṛṣṇa as being itself of which all beings partake – for there is no sense to the thought of a multiplicity of being as such. As to the multifarious deities of the tradition, Śaṅkara treats them as merely belonging in another category of beings, albeit ones that exemplify the components of sacrifice. So, when Kṛṣṇa says at 9.24, 'I am the only Lord' (*aham hi prabhur eva*), Śaṅkara says (p. 144) that this means, 'I am the selfhood of the deities (*devatātmatva*) of all the sacrifices', that is to say, their essence. The importance of this affirmation of monotheism to our understanding of Śaṅkara can be gleaned indirectly from an observation made by Etienne Gilson about Hebraic monotheism in comparison to Greek philosophy: none of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, or the neo-Platonists posited the existence of a single God, 'because they lacked that clear idea of God which makes it impossible to admit more than one.'²⁵ Śaṅkara's emphatic rejection of a second God is clearly tied to his developed idea of what and who Kṛṣṇa is.

This one God is to be understood both in the terms of a devotional love for a supreme being and in insightful understanding of being itself. (We will look more closely at how God, thus conceived, is integral to Śaṅkara's doctrine of *brahman*.) In another of the poetic sequences of self-identification that marks Kṛṣṇa's disclosure from the middle of the *Gītā* onwards, he talks at 15.12–15 of being the effulgence (*tejas*) of the sun, the moon and fire, the vitality (*ojas*) in life on earth, and the cooking of food; of being seated in the hearts of all, and in memory, knowing and their loss. Taking all this in, Śaṅkara then proceeds to say, 'In the verses beginning, "that effulgence in the sun which..." (15.12), is given a compendium of the sovereign powers of God – the Lord called Nārāyaṇa – as it is rendered by particular contingent limiting adjuncts. Then, the succeeding verses begin to determine his reality, as without contingency, as simple, as distinct from the contingent limiting adjuncts of the perishable and imperishable.'²⁶ God understood in the language of prayer and poetry is for Śaṅkara a God described through contingent limiting adjuncts – that is to say, our conceptual capacities, our emotional needs, our cognitive dispositions. Although here he subtly subordinates the worshipped God, through much of the *Gītā* he is much more cautious about, indeed even asks for, such a God. But even when he recognises worship of God, it is always secondary to the gnostic function of self-realization through God, as we will see later.

This subordination leads on (*via* a discussion of mutable non-existence and the immutability of existence, which we have already considered in the opening section) to Kṛṣṇa's statement at 15.17, 'But beyond this is the foremost

person (*uttama puruṣa*), who is called the supreme self (*paramātma*)/and entering the three worlds, upholds them, as the unchanging (*avyaya*) God (*īśvara*).’ Now Śaṅkara presents his vision of God, in a passage dense with the tactics characteristic of his theological articulation. He glosses ‘supreme self’ as, ‘supreme,’ compared to bodily selves made from primal unwisdom;²⁷ and ‘self’ as ‘the innermost consciousness of all beings.’²⁸ He reads ‘upholds’ (*bibharti*) as ‘bears [the three worlds] purely (*mātra*) through intrinsic (*svarūpa*) real (*sat*) being (*bhāva*), entering [those worlds] through “the power in the energy of consciousness” (*caitanyabalaśakti*).’ He concludes, ‘The unchanging “God” is the omniscient, called Nārāyaṇa, sovereign by nature.’²⁹ God is the supreme being, but strictly in the sense of being the true, the only, truly existing core of all beings, their very self. This supremacy is not given through Kṛṣṇa’s being the most ‘beingful’ entity or what is ‘most in being’ (*‘das Seiendste’* in Heidegger’s critique of the illusion³⁰) but, through being the self of all, that by which beings have being. Kṛṣṇa is a particular being, a subjective presence with maximal qualities; but Kṛṣṇa is also precisely not particular, for he is, instead, the expression of being, as the self of all. In indicating this inwardness, I think that Śaṅkara also clarifies that Kṛṣṇa, as God, is not to be seen – only – as another being, whatsoever the primacy of his being. (But of course, he is also to be seen thus, as the God of loving worship, of both prayer and praise.)

Our sense of self is given in this world by our individuated embodiment, but that world and the body in it are not truly being, nor existent in the ultimate sense – as we have seen before, Śaṅkara argues that they are changeful and thus less than real. But consciousness as such, that which is innermost in our changeful life, is our being – and that being is God. Doubtless we need to examine in greater detail Śaṅkara’s topology of the self’s being, but again, it suffices at present to see that the self is consciousness given by – indeed not different from – God’s being. This being-consciousness that is our very self, is Kṛṣṇa, sovereign in being, because not plagued by the limitations of unwisdom. (Note too, that it is implied that it is this unwisdom that structures our embodied life and therefore provides the adjuncts through which we devoutly take God to be the light, the life, the living and the knowing.) And we call that God, Kṛṣṇa/Nārāyaṇa. ‘God’ is the term we use to indicate being itself – being which gives us our being – for it is thus that we come to worship and to think theologically in the first place.

It becomes clear that Śaṅkara’s avowal of a theological commitment to Kṛṣṇa is based on his mapping of our being onto Kṛṣṇa’s. A divine quality that might, to another theologian, signify the greatness of God becomes, for Śaṅkara, an indicator of non-dual being. Kṛṣṇa says at 9.9, ‘I am unbound by those actions (*na mām tāni karmāṇi nibadhnanti*)’ that come of bringing

forth, sustaining and dissolving the world, because, he says, 'I sit' (*āsīnām*) as one sitting apart (*udāsīnavat*), free from ties (*asaktam*). Whereas Rāmānuja takes this to imply a theodicy in which God is not tied to consequential action in the way beings in the world are,³¹ Śāṅkara explains that Kṛṣṇa is untouched because the self is unchangeable (*ātmano'vikriyatvāt*), having freedom that consists in 'forsaking attachment to fruit, abandoning the possessiveness of the "I do"'.³² Kṛṣṇa's divinity is therefore expressed through the modular universality of selfhood: to be is to be the self, even though beings are differentially and only partially aware of it. Kṛṣṇa's divinity consists in his being the first self, the always-realized self, the perfect self that never required perfecting, the self of plenitude. While preserving the theological primacy of Kṛṣṇa, Śāṅkara also expresses his primacy in terms of the universal imperative to gnoseological understanding. Kṛṣṇa is the exemplary self, for his self is the self as it is to be realized by us. We may be reminded here of the paradox implicit in Meister Eckhart's words, "There is between God and the soul neither strangeness nor remoteness, therefore the soul is not only equal with God but it is ... the same that He is."³³

This is a careful, but nonetheless emphatic, circumspection of a theology of being, for God's intimacy with us comes out of an ultimate (but only ultimate) non-duality. When Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna at 2.17 that he should know that 'that' (*tat*) cannot suffer destruction (*vināśa*), Śāṅkara clarifies (p. 18) that 'that' is *brahman* ('called real', *sadākhyam* – to signify our efforts to talk about it). It has nothing of its own, and so it does not cease to have what is its own; thus, it suffers no loss, no mutability that would destroy its being. So *brahman* does not undergo such a loss as Devadatta might undergo a loss of wealth. Śāṅkara once again points to the incoherence of thinking of *brahman* as a particular being or its non-being adjuncts. Now he makes his crucial move: 'Nothing can destroy its own self, not even God. For self is *brahman*.'³⁴ God-talk is therefore always within self-talk, which ultimately is *brahman*-talk (to the extent that *brahman* can be talked of). God cannot destroy Godself, not because of a theological conception of God's fullness but because of the ultimacy of self-that-is-*brahman*. Even God is *brahman*, and there is no more powerful way for Śāṅkara to signify his location of theology within the transmetaphysics of *brahman*.

It has been suggested in Christian theology that modern theologians find it difficult to make sense of older approaches in which an intensely personal, narrative and dogmatically significant conception of God is reconciled with the God of metaphysics: 'Modern commentators sometimes find this unbelievable, but for Augustine, the God who is Being itself, immutable, incorporeal, and so on, is simultaneously the God who called Abraham, sent Moses, and for that matter revealed his name at the burning bush. There is

no need to set metaphysics and salvation history over against one another.³⁵ Augustine's distinction is between the God for us (his *nomen misericordiae*) and God in himself (his *nomen substantiae*),³⁶ but these conceptual distinctions, necessary for our understanding, are not inconsistent and do not imply any division in divine nature. Clearly, for Śaṅkara too, the personal narrative and a theology of being co-exist in the *Gītā*; indeed, the former is the mode of revelation of the latter, while the latter is what provides cosmogonic underpinning for the assurances of the former.

But we cannot pretend that the resolution of the tension between these two conceptions of Kṛṣṇa is an easy one. On occasion, Śaṅkara is keenly aware of the problem that Kṛṣṇa's persona presents to the theology of being, for the *Gītā* itself expresses it clearly. As Kṛṣṇa says at 9.11, when he takes human form (*mānuṣīm tanum*) the foolish treat him with contempt, not knowing his highest being (*paraṃ bhāvam*), as the great god of beings (*bhūtamaheśvara*). Śaṅkara reads 'highest being' as supreme selfhood (*paramātmavam*; p. 140), the self of beings; and yet it is this which is treated as a human person. So, clearly there is a tension between the concrete personhood of the Kṛṣṇa who is teaching him now and the sublime being that sustains all reality. At other places, he strains to overcome this tension by *fiat*. In 14.27, he suggests at one point that the word 'brahman' is *brahman* as conceptualised by us.³⁷ But then he puts these words into Kṛṣṇa's mouth: 'Of that *brahman*, I myself, the *brahman* free of all conception – and none else – am the support.'³⁸ So Kṛṣṇa's words – conception-laden as they are – must, through divine will, be able to tell the truth of what is beyond conception, since all other truths about *brahman* are limited by our conceptions. By permitting Kṛṣṇa to say of himself that he is *brahman*, Śaṅkara wants to blast through our inescapable limitations, for only in that way can we begin to see both Kṛṣṇa and *brahman*. Śaṅkara's resolve is remarkably similar to medieval Christianity; as Richard Kearney notes, 'most scholastics identified God with Being by means of proofs and analogies, seeking some sort of balance between Being's universality and indeterminacy on the one hand, and God's density as a quasi-subject or person (which holds God from descent into infinite dispersion) on the other.'³⁹ It even resonates, in this particular way, with more modern developments, such as process theism's 'distinction between the abstract essence of God (as absolute, eternal, unchangeable) and God's concrete actuality, which is temporal, relative, changing, and dependent on decisions made by finite actualities.'⁴⁰

Of course, text-historically, it is difficult to know precisely why Śaṅkara seems to move back and forth between different articulations of the relationship between *brahman* and Kṛṣṇa (as *īśvara*). In a study of the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, Paul Hacker surveyed most of the occurrences of

brahman – both as *param* or ultimate and *aparam* as lower – and *īśvara*.⁴¹ (Kṛṣṇa is not identified as *īśvara* in that text, but Hacker also wanted to expound the claim that Śaṅkara was, in any case, a Vaiṣṇava.) The textual analysis is wide-ranging and highly instructive, but Hacker's conclusion does not quite bear out his analysis. He points out that Śaṅkara tends to use *brahman* and *īśvara* terms interchangeably, identifying the latter in terms of the lower form of the former when asserting the 'illusory' nature of the world, but at other times identifying the latter even with the ultimate *brahman*; there are times, he notes, when one is reluctant to decide. From this, he concludes that Śaṅkara therefore uses these terms loosely, as was probably the widespread practice in his mainly theistic socio-historical context, so that 'an intuitive theism has joined with an intellectual monism to form an illogical, but for that reason much more lively, combination'.⁴² Yet, he also recognises that on Śaṅkara's interpretation *brahman* and *īśvara* are not different; so it is not clear why he thinks Śaṅkara is only speaking loosely or is being illogical. It seems more persuasive to think that, as with medieval Christian scholastics, he too was striving to find the balance between different ways of speaking. Furthermore, the non-duality he expounds has the asymmetrical feature we have already noticed: *brahman* ultimately, is in excess of being and non-being, and even God-as-being-as-such; but it is also not other than non-being, and being, and even God. So Śaṅkara has to speak of God as not-other than *brahman*, while also gesturing at *brahman* being in excess of God. Compared to the *Brahmasūtras*, the *Gītā* has another striking feature, of course, in that Kṛṣṇa is the *īśvara* who speaks directly. And while it may be that Śaṅkara does struggle to keep the two apart, we should draw lessons from the struggle itself – both when he distinguishes them, occasionally sharply; and when he runs them together. My exploration here suggests that, regardless of whether it was a failure on his part to make rigorous distinctions (for historical reasons) or not, we can learn something about the challenge of presenting non-duality, the non-duality of God as being itself, and *brahman* as the ground of being and non-being.

My conclusion is that in the *Gītābhāṣya*, Śaṅkara seeks the balance Kearney talks of, between the personal, quasi-subjective presence of Kṛṣṇa and Kṛṣṇa as the essential self, as being itself. But he has an even more fraught balance to preserve, that between anything that he can say about Kṛṣṇa (and that Kṛṣṇa says about himself) and the *brahman* that is the support of all this. Kṛṣṇa – as the concrete subject, as supreme being, as the self of all – speaks and is therefore identifiable through self-proclamation. Yet this identity and identifiability do not bespeak of anything other than *brahman*, even while *brahman* is not exhausted by such identity. So *brahman* becomes the terminological focus of Śaṅkara's exploration of how we even

begin to understand the possibility of reality, including how God renders that reality. I believe that Śaṅkara is highly original in what he has to say here. In order to see that in more detail, we need to examine the relationship between *brahman* and Kṛṣṇa.

Brahman, Kṛṣṇa and being(s): The ontology of non-duality

We now turn to the radical aspect of *brahman* that makes for the very name of Śaṅkara's position – non-dualism (*a-dvaita*). In the first section, we saw how *brahman* is distinguished from both changeful beings and immutable being-as-such. Śaṅkara, however, views this difference as entirely consistent with the non-duality of being and non-being from *brahman*. It is this claim of Śaṅkara's which is probably unique to him. However, in the context of the *Gītā*, he must reach this only through Kṛṣṇa – and what Śaṅkara says of the relationship between being and Kṛṣṇa is important. To anticipate the course of this section, we will see that for Śaṅkara, it is the case that being itself is Kṛṣṇa while Kṛṣṇa is being. This is not a symmetrical identity. To say that being is Kṛṣṇa is to say that the very understanding of self and world is given only through their complex unity with Kṛṣṇa. This asymmetrical identity between Kṛṣṇa and being nevertheless falls short of true realization, for all our talk is of Kṛṣṇa, while *brahman* is beyond.

Let us, then, look more carefully at what Śaṅkara says about Kṛṣṇa and being, *via self*. For Śaṅkara, the key to the understanding of Kṛṣṇa's declaration of being the all (with nothing left over, so to speak) is the recognition of Kṛṣṇa as being self. So when, at 7.19, Kṛṣṇa says that the cognisant one (*jñānavān*) realizes, 'Vāsudeva is all (*sarvaṃ*)', Śaṅkara, as we would expect, answers the question of who is all with the answer, Vāsudeva, who is the innermost self (*pratyagātman*), the self of all (*sarvātman*) (p. 122).

The identity of God and self has implications for the Advaita metaphysics that Śaṅkara reads into the *Gītā*, as the 'all' is made clearer in two verses in chapter 10. At 10.20, Kṛṣṇa says, 'I am the beginning, middle and end of beings' (*aham ādiś ca madhyaṃ bhūtānām anta eva*), and at 10.32, he says, 'Of created things (*sargānām*), I am the beginning, middle and end'. As we will see with Rāmānuja, the 'I am ...' permits of different interpretations, of which ontological identity is but one. Śaṅkara treats that interpretation, however, as so obvious as to need no comment. The non-dual ontotheologism is revealed a little later, in 10.39. There, Kṛṣṇa says, 'There is no being, moving or unmoving that can exist without me' (*na syād asti vinā yat syān*

mayā bhūtaṃ carācaram). Śaṅkara points out that ‘can exist’ (*syāt*) is ‘can be’ (*bhavet*); and then goes on to make the point clear: ‘For what is rejected, forsaken, by me, becomes without self, void.’⁴³ The relationship between God and the world of beings is asymmetrical in the sense that to be is to be self, and to be self is to have Kṛṣṇa as self. God gives beings their self, by being their self.

But it should be kept in mind that God’s being is not given by being the world. (So the lazy equation of Advaita with at least one form of the Western doctrine of pantheism, that God and world are identical,⁴⁴ should be resisted.) At 9.4, Kṛṣṇa says, ‘This whole world is diffused through with me in my unmanifest aspect; all beings stand in me, but I am not established in them.’⁴⁵ Śaṅkara seeks in his commentary to preserve both the ontological identity by which the being of beings is given by Kṛṣṇa and the asymmetry of dependence contained in that identity. As ever, Śaṅkara takes ‘stand in me’ to mean ‘established in my own selfhood’ (*mayā’tmanā’tmavattvena sthitāni*) (p. 137). He takes Kṛṣṇa to be making this syllogism: No functional (*vyavahāra*) being can be without self (*nirātmakam*), and I am their self, so they are established in me (*mayi sthitāni*). That does not mean that Kṛṣṇa is established in them; Śaṅkara glosses ‘established’ (*avasthita*) here as ‘contained’ (*adheya*); so Kṛṣṇa is not contained in them, or confined in their being. Śaṅkara puts this statement on Kṛṣṇa’s behalf: ‘I am the core of even space’ (*ākāśasyāpy antaratamo hy aham*), driving home the asymmetry between him and the beings of the (less-than-real) world. Just in order to reinforce the dynamic interplay of immanence and transcendence, the *Gītā* itself has 9.5, where Kṛṣṇa seems to contradict himself immediately, by saying, ‘And yet beings are not established in me’ (*na ca matsthāni bhūtāni*). But this latter assertion, Śaṅkara indicates, is not at the same level as the previous one stating the opposite. Whereas the establishment of all beings in Kṛṣṇa is in his unmanifest aspect (the unseen image (*avyakta mūrti*)), which is an understanding of him still within our ken, that still does not exhaust him; beyond even the containment of beings – and therefore beyond our ken – is Kṛṣṇa in his self as it is (*ātmano yāthātmyam*) (p. 138), where beings are not established in him. This asymmetry is an important aspect of non-duality, one to which we will keep returning in the course of the chapter.

Kṛṣṇa therefore says of beings that they come under the category of existence (i.e. ultimately have being) only through him, while his existence is not defined through them. Śaṅkara then explains this through the formulation that Kṛṣṇa is the self of beings, even while beings do not give him his self. Again, at 11.40, when Arjuna hails Kṛṣṇa as encompassing all and therefore being all (*sarva samāpnoṣi tato’ṣi sarvaḥ*), Śaṅkara expands ‘encompassing’ as ‘encompassing wholly, through being the single self’,⁴⁶ and reads

‘being all’ as ‘without you, no being exists.’⁴⁷ God as being gives being; God is therefore not the general category of being, the universal (*sāmānya*) which is dependent on instantiation by particular beings to be their universal.

Going at least back to Rudolf Otto,⁴⁸ this position has been compared to Meister Eckhart on the oneness of God and self. (I will not go into the contentious argument from Paul Hacker over whether the comparison is about the true nature of being (as Otto claimed) or whether it was purely about the notion of consciousness as reality.⁴⁹) The complication of understanding Kṛṣṇa as both being-as-such, which gives beings their being, and as the conscious self of all, is resonant of Eckhart’s saying both that ‘Existence is God’ (*Esse Deus est*),⁵⁰ and that creatures are nothing in themselves since they possess their being in the divine existence, which is pure intelligence or understanding (prior, in fact, to existence).⁵¹ But this seems to imply that God is the existence of beings as a whole; and while Śaṅkara, whether he held it or not, would not have had to worry about being seen as advocating pantheism, Eckhart was charged with heresy. As Colledge and McGinn point out, Eckhart might not have given a good defence of himself, but theologically, he could not be seen as advocating pantheism, because he sought to maintain the transcendence of God.⁵² He did this by distinguishing between the ‘formally inherent existence’ of creatures and the ‘absolute existence’ of God.⁵³ If being is what particular beings have, then God is not such being: to quote them on Eckhart’s position, ‘God is the existence of all things (*esse omnium*) in an absolute sense, but not as formally inhering in them’. This could virtually be a commentary on the *Gītā* verses we have considered above.

The absolute term for transcendence that Eckhart uses is ‘Unity’ (*unum*), an indication of a dialectical relationship between God and beings, where God is simultaneously distinct and indistinct, set off against beings and yet not to be distinguished from them. Given, further, that consciousness or intelligence (*intelligere*) for Eckhart is another way of understanding divine nature – for ‘what is to understand other than to become one or be one with what is understood?’⁵⁴ – one can see why his view of Being can be called ‘mystical ontologism.’⁵⁵ The absolute oneness of God combined with the capacity of the human being to understand this oneness makes for a powerful interpretation of the relationship between the mystical experience that transcends difference and the ontology of the transcendental that permits the overcoming of such difference (for never having been absolutely different at all). Śaṅkara’s account of such realization comes in a passage that reads divine unity in Kṛṣṇa’s statement about his supervisory power. At 9.10, Kṛṣṇa says that the world of moving and unmoving things is born of material nature (*prakṛti*) under his supervision (*adhyakṣa*). Śaṅkara reads

(pp. 139–40) this supervisory power only as the self’s intrinsic form (of self) as pure witness (*dr̥śimātrasvarūpa*), which is unchangeable (*avikriya*). But there are no other conscious beings (*anyasya cetanā*), no other experiences (*anyasya bhokturabhāvāt*); there is only one deity (*eka deva*), which is the absolute consciousness (*paramārtha caitanya*). Here, Kṛṣṇa – as the one deity – is explicitly read as the consciousness in and of all beings, the consciousness that is in itself all.

We must not, of course, over-stress the parallel with Eckhart, for it may be the case that Eckhart’s concept of unity, as oneness of God and self, could lend itself just as much to a theology of union compatible with Rāmānuja’s account of the being-together of God and beings (although I am not sufficiently persuaded of that possibility to advocate that myself). But we can find mutually illuminating Śaṅkara’s and Eckhart’s strategy of understanding our own existence through seeing existence as essentially God; Śaṅkara explains being – and especially, our being – through Kṛṣṇa. This does resonate with Eckhart’s saying that God is more intimate to all things than they are to themselves, so that, as Jean Greisch notes, the same task is both spiritual and ontological.⁵⁶

Richard Kearney has made the interesting point that the ontology of the divine self-statement at Exodus 3.14, ‘I am that I am’, which we have looked at before, was interpreted in two polar ways by medieval thinkers bringing Greek philosophy to bear on the Biblical God: either as an ontotheology of God as being (indeed, a category of substance) or as a mystical ontologism in which divine and human consciousness are conflated in the ‘I am’.⁵⁷ We have just seen that, reading Śaṅkara through Eckhart, we do find a mystical ontologism in the former. Not only does Śaṅkara see being or existence as God (i.e., the world of being as consisting in God’s being), but he also sees God as being – indeed, as supremely being (i.e. taking the being of the self as indicative of the supreme plenitude of God’s being).

Admittedly, he is less interested in this understanding of Kṛṣṇa as supremely being; we must see this only through his brief and matter-of-fact re-description of the *Gītā*’s approach to God *via eminentiae*, its repeated exaltation of Kṛṣṇa (whether self-declared or stated by Arjuna) through the infinite extension of all the virtues when talking of him. This is strikingly the case in both Kṛṣṇa’s preparatory self-description in chapter 10, and Arjuna’s (and Saṅjaya’s) description of the cosmic vision in chapter 11. Śaṅkara simply re-describes the *Gītā*’s verses, and draws very little from them; we will see how Rāmānuja uses the opportunity to read considerably more theologically significant meaning into them. For example, where Rāmānuja reads Kṛṣṇa’s ‘Of the Vṛṣṇi clan, I am Vāsudeva’ at 10.37 as indicating that the son of Vāsudeva is the sovereign manifestation (*vibhūti*) of God

(p. 350), Śaṅkara glosses it as 'I myself, who am your friend' (*ayam eva ahaṃ tvatsakhaḥ*) (p. 157). At the same time, Śaṅkara makes no effort to read away the awesome theological lesson of these two chapters, the presentation of the God who exhausts description – description, especially, that locates him as the pre-eminent presence in all forms of being, from earth and fire to weapons and horses, from gods and sages to prayers and seasons. This is the God of light and death, time and destruction. All that is already in the *Gītā* and Śaṅkara leaves it as it is, in the main. Nevertheless, of all beings, Śaṅkara is content to leave Kṛṣṇa supreme. Kṛṣṇa's supremacy, for Śaṅkara, lies in the fact that he alone provides beings with their being.⁵⁸ Hence my suggestion that Śaṅkara combines ontotheology with mystical ontologism. This combination is perhaps unique to him, and sharpens the nomenclatural point that his position is non-dualist and not monist.

What we see in Śaṅkara is that God is other than beings, while also not-other to them. At 13.18, Kṛṣṇa summarises his teachings on *brahman* by saying that by understanding his teachings, his devotee 'attains my state of being' (*madbhāvāyopapadyate*). Śaṅkara glosses 'my state of being' as 'the state of being the supreme self' (*paramātmabhāvaḥ*) (p. 202). This is in keeping with his consistent reading of Kṛṣṇa as the self of all beings (hence his supremacy qua self). Yet, at 13.27, when Kṛṣṇa says that 'he sees [truly] who sees the supreme god (*parameśvaram*) abiding (*tiṣṭhantaṃ*) alike in all beings (*sarveṣu bhūteṣu*)', as the 'imperishable among the perishable' (*vinaśyatsv avinaśyantaṃ*), Śaṅkara takes this opportunity to say that 'this is meant to show the utter difference of beings from the supreme god'.⁵⁹ How so? The modification described as 'birth' (*bhāvavikārāṇāṃ janilakṣaṇaḥ*) is the root (*mūla*) of all other modifications; and all modifications end in destruction (*sarve bhāvavikārāḥ vināśāntāḥ*). Beyond death (*vināśāt paraḥ*) there is no modification. By saying that this final modification (*antyabhāvavikāra*) is absent in the supreme god, all modification is denied (*pratiṣiddha*) of him. 'Therefore, it is established that the supreme god is completely other to all beings, is without particularity, and is singular'.⁶⁰ The otherness of God here, however utter, is otherness from what is not truly being, for what is other to God is not being at all, but non-being. So it is that the one who sees the supreme god thus truly sees; and the one who truly sees, sees the *ātman* as one, undivided (*ekam avibhaktam*) in and as God.

The otherness of this godself consists in its singular reality, while the divided and modified are metaphysically less-than-real. The otherness is not between God and the being of beings. Alterity is therefore merely the non-dualist otherness of the one real to the less-than-real.

It should be realized, however, that this is not Śaṅkara's final move. We will now turn to his argument that the non-otherness of God to all

being is itself part of the non-otherness of *brahman* to both being **and** non-being. This is evident in the celebrated exegesis of 13.12, where Śaṅkara indicates an alternative gloss which he rejects, and which is later adopted by Rāmānuja in pointed disagreement. Kṛṣṇa first says, 'I shall speak of that which is to be cognised, knowing which one attains immortality.' This is not controversial. In the next line, he goes on, '*anādimat paraṃ brahma na sat tan nāsad ucyate*'. The latter part of it means, 'it is neither said that it is nor that it is not'; the significance of which will be clear soon. The crucial interpretive move is to read the first half as '*anādimatparaṃ brahma*': 'the *brahman* beyond is without beginning'. The line would then read, 'the *brahman* beyond is that which is without beginning; it is said neither that it is nor that it is not'. Śaṅkara goes on (p. 197) to say, *anādimat* is one without beginning; and who is that one? That which is beyond (*paraṃ*), that is, the unsurpassed (*niratiśaya*) *brahman*. He then acknowledges that some split the phrase (*padam chindanti*) as '*anādi matparaṃ brahma*': *brahman*, which is without beginning (*anādi*) is 'that which has me beyond it' (*matparaṃ*), that of which, I, Vāsudeva, am the 'supreme power' (*parāśakti*). Rāmānuja will later take precisely that reading, with significant theological consequences, for on that reading, beginningless *brahman*, whatever it is, is distinct from Kṛṣṇa and subject to him, having him beyond it. Śaṅkara is aware that, on his reading, the '*mat*' suffix appears redundant, since '*anādi paraṃ brahma*' – 'the *brahman* beyond is without beginning' – seems sufficient to convey the meaning, without having to add another phrase to convey the same possessive qualifier. Śaṅkara concludes that its purpose is to complete the verse (*ślokapūrnārthah*).

More importantly, Śaṅkara argues, the alternative reading is untenable because it would then contradict the following claim, namely, that it neither is nor is not. Kṛṣṇa would engage in a contradiction (*vipratishedha*) if he were first to point out the possession of a distinctive power (*viśiṣṭaśaktimattvapradarśana*) on his part – his being beyond *brahman* – only to then go on to say, as the last part of the line definitely shows, that *brahman* is to be known only through the denial of all distinguishing attributes (*sarvaviśeṣapratishedha*). But if Śaṅkara's interpretation is taken, then it is consistent to say that beginningless *brahman* is beyond, its beyondness characterised by noting that it is said of it that it neither is nor is not (p. 198). Here we go back to the start of our study of Śaṅkara: the critical aspect of approaching *brahman* – what structures the entire inquiry – is that *brahman* is not being as such, and therefore is not available through a (howsoever demanding) phenomenological focus by consciousness on its own being. Of course, consciousness – the presencing self that is *ātman* – can indeed realize its non-difference from *brahman* only through rigorous

inquiry; but in the intellectual process of characterising the subject of our inquiring cognition (*jñeya*) through our reading of sacred text, what we have to realize is that *brahman* is not being as such, even at its purest or in its supremacy.

Śaṅkara now has to face up to the standard objection that he must always face when he says that *brahman* is neither being nor non-being but yet is to be realized. He considers the following objection: If a thing cannot be talked of by the phrase, 'x is', then it is not [existent].⁶¹ So too with the thing called 'the realisable' (*jñeya*). All judgements (*sarvāḥ buddhyah*) must involve the judgement of existence or non-existence (*astināstibuddhyanugatāḥ eva*). So, that which is to be realized (*jñeya*) must be either an object of an awareness involving the judgement that it is⁶² or of one involving the judgement that it is not. To this, he replies that this is not the case when *brahman* is the *jñeya*. With sensory things like pots (*indriyagamyam vastu ghaṭādikaṃ*) this is indeed the case. But *brahman* is beyond the senses (*atīndriya*), and is associated with sacred testimony as a means of knowledge (*śabdakapramāṇagamyatva*) alone. 'The two forms of judgement do not apply to it, and thus it is said of it that it neither is nor is not. The sacred texts, on that [*brahman*] which is other than what is to be known or not known, are for the purpose of attaining that which must be realised.'⁶³

He expands further (p. 199) on why *brahman* cannot be spoken of through the expressions, 'is' and 'is not'. Words about objects convey meaning through the use of genus (*jāti*), action (*kriya*), quality (*guṇa*) or relationship (*saṃbandha*); e.g. cow/horse, cooking/reading, white/black, wealthy/owner of cows respectively. But *brahman* is not a genus (as we have already seen, not even the genus 'existence'), and so cannot be expressed by '...is' and the like; this is what it means to say that it is 'without qualities' (*nirguṇa*). It is without action (*niṣkriya*); and as it is unitary (*ekatva*) it has no relationships. It is non-dual (*advaya*), not an object (*aviśaya*); it is selfhood (*ātmatva*). So it is said that it cannot be talked about through any word.⁶⁴ It should be noted that the *via negativa* adopted by Śaṅkara here, as elsewhere when talking about *brahman*, does not much fit into a comparison with the dominant strands of medieval Christian scholasticism: the insistence on the non-objectivity of *brahman*, and its non-dual non-relationality, indicate the uniquely non-realist metaphysics of Śaṅkara, wherein the ontology of the experienced world, while left untouched philosophically, is nevertheless circumscribed radically by consigning it to the ultimate category of changeful non-being.⁶⁵ Without that move, Śaṅkara could simply be seen as proffering an incoherent idealist metaphysics.

One specific comparison that does bear up is his notion of *brahman* as unitary or one, that is to say – in the language of Christian scholasticism,

and Aquinas particularly – simple.⁶⁶ Conceptually, as Fergus Kerr points out,⁶⁷ unitary nature relates to not being a genus. However, crucially, the Thomistic conception of divine simplicity derives from the idea of God as pure being, that is, one whose essential nature does not differ from his existence; for only where there is such difference can there be the complex qualifications that make up an individual. But *brahman* is not even being-as-such but rather, the way there is both being and non-being; so Śaṅkara is striving here towards a notion of unitariness shorn even of considerations about the nature of being. The unitariness of *brahman* seems here to be a way of indicating the import of the *via negativa*, namely, that all names require linguistic proliferation to capture the differentiated structure that permits qualities, and unitariness is nothing other than a place-holder for the incapacity of qualification to advert to *brahman*. For Śaṅkara, the pure beingness of God is itself somehow still within our conceptual compass, due to the fortunate circumstance of the self-presentation of Kṛṣṇa; while what is beyond, as that which we call *brahman*, is that from which both being and non-being come.

On the basis of this examination, I suggest that things are exactly the opposite of what Richard De Smet says in his religiously-inspired reading of Śaṅkara on Kṛṣṇa. De Smet is insightful on what he calls the ‘open man’ of the *Gītā*, arguing that a highly personalistic conception is found in it, despite an abstract, Sāṃkhya-based starting point for the conception of self. In the chapters on Self, we will see how this is only partially true, and how a sophisticated interaction between abstract and personalistic conception of self is key to both the metaphysics and the ethics of the non-dualist reading of the *Gītā*. But De Smet also goes on to assert that this exalted personalism marks even the *Gītā*’s conception of the Deity. ‘None of the great teachings of the Upaniṣads concerning the absolute *Brahman* is neglected but the notion of *Brahman* or even *Paramātman* is itself transcended insofar as it is said to have a basis. This basis is Kṛṣṇa as the supreme *Puruṣa* (*Puruṣottama*), the Absolute as Person, *Bhagavān*, Dispenser of grace, not only love but Lover in the eternal union of perfect mutual *bhakti*.⁶⁸ My point is that, on the contrary, it is precisely this personalism that is exceeded by Kṛṣṇa himself, on the way to what is realized of *brahman*.

If somehow we still choose to call *brahman*, thus adverted to by Śaṅkara, ‘God’, it would be something like Eckhart’s God beyond God; but we must be guided by the fact that Śaṅkara himself chooses not to cease using both the godly terms regarding Kṛṣṇa and the trans-godly terminology of *brahman*. The striking comparison here is probably Cusanus who, in the mid-15th century most interestingly explored the possibilities opened up by Eckhart. Cusanus too talks of God, but also of Godhead, as the negation of the

relationship between being and non-being; as Burkhard Mojsisch notes, ‘one can know the pure negation of ... godly unity ... only when one occupies the standpoint of this unity itself and expresses it in a godly manner.’⁶⁹ Here we approach a comparison that requires a great deal more systematic work as a task in itself, something I am not able to undertake in the context of this book. In Cusanus we find the move to Godhead that is not through being, even at its purest. Ignoring the Aristotelian requirement that a definition proceed through the predication of a genus and the specific difference of the species – in a manner carefully set aside above by Śaṅkara too (probably in reference to the Nyāya rules of definition available to him) – Cusanus famously talks of the Godhead thus: ‘the “not-other” is not other than the not-other.’⁷⁰ In this way, Mojsisch points out, the not-other defines itself through itself, being oppositionless. Even ‘being’, ‘true’ and ‘one’ are what they are only through the not-other. ‘On the other hand, however, since the not-other is not everything other, or is different from all others, inasmuch as it is not other than the not-other, it transcends all others.’⁷¹ Conceived thus, Mojsisch says, Godhead ‘as oppositionless opposition guarantees movement forth from itself and back to itself and not as movement beyond itself.’⁷² Here we have a summing up that could apply to Śaṅkara’s *brahman*: it is not-other, i.e., not-different, i.e., not-dual. It stands in opposition to being and non-being, but without opposition, since there is nothing other than it. And it is realized only by itself, in the self realizing itself as *brahman*.

We begin to see what Śaṅkara is doing by preserving both God (called Kṛṣṇa, Vāsudeva) and *brahman* in his account, despite their not being different. I have already commented that, for Śaṅkara, Kṛṣṇa is not a creator God; at 13.19, Kṛṣṇa himself says that nature and self – that is to say, both orders of being – are beginningless (*anādi*). Śaṅkara explains that beings are not creation (*kṛtaṃ*), that is, beings wholly existent yet distinct from the being that created them. He dismisses an opponent’s anxiety to assert that the world is God’s creation (*iśvarasya jagataḥ kartṛtvam*; p. 202). If God were defined as creator, before the emergence (*utpattāḥ*) of nature and self at the point of creation, God would be no God, he expatiates. That leaves intact his view, which we have explored, of Kṛṣṇa as the supreme being whose supremacy of being gives being to all other things but which does not consist in being the greatest instantiation of being amongst beings.⁷³

In this, we have a parallel to the Christological phenomenology that seeks, as Orrin Summerell does, for example, to develop a theology out of Heidegger’s rather impatient observation that any ‘metaphysics that determines God as the perfect causal ground of beings’ is ‘an ungodly God’, while ‘the God of being is definable solely in terms of the figuration of being as such.’⁷⁴ So, beings are uncaused by God, but have their being through God.

As Summerell summarises his Heideggerian position, in freedom, ‘God is God not as God, in the sameness of deity, but rather as the identity of being; as another subjectivity or as one’s own subjectivity; as the wholeness of experience that is the relation of these three terms; or as the nothing that is the negation of all of them.’⁷⁵ Śaṅkara’s Kṛṣṇa too is aptly described thus, as the self of all, as the identity of being. But, of course, the comparison rather depends on one’s interpretation of Heidegger and what Heidegger said. Heidegger said in a later work that ‘being is further than all entity, be it a rock, an animal, an artwork, a machine, be it an angel or God’, listing God among those entities that have being, while being is not God.⁷⁶ Clearly, while preserving that concrete subject who is Kṛṣṇa, Śaṅkara also sees the *Gītā* as understanding the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and being quite differently. If one considered, instead, the Heidegger who said that ‘the divine itself lies outside the field of Being and outside metaphysics’⁷⁷ – metaphysics understood in the self-serving way in which Heidegger uses it – then it would seem that the Heideggerian divine is more properly comparable to Śaṅkara’s *brahman*, for *brahman* clearly is not the unmanifest being as such (although being is also *brahman*). Yet there is no difference between Kṛṣṇa (both as the foremost being and as being which gives being to all) and *brahman* (who is the ground of being and non-being as such). It is that paradox which invites ultimately no further words but only the realization of *brahman*.

Worshipping Kṛṣṇa, attaining *brahman*: Self-realization and theology

So, we find that there is no simple answer to the question of the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and *brahman* in Śaṅkara’s commentary. Taking the commentary as a whole, or at least, across many passages in many chapters, we gain the impression of a struggle to maintain a balance between widely differing conceptions of ultimate meaning (and this is not just an issue about the layers of the *Gītā* itself). But some sort of an answer, howsoever hedged in by elusive restrictions on meaning, emerges. Kṛṣṇa is the subject of worship, the person with maximal qualities, the vibrantly relational recipient of worship and source of grace; but also the abstract presence in all, the supreme being understood as being itself out of which being is found. And this is because Kṛṣṇa is self; while he is the supreme self and the self of all, the self as self is the essence in all beings; and the significance of this is that *brahman* is the self of all, is not other than beings, and is not other than God. This is so because *brahman* is not other than being and non-being, but that whereby both are possible.

All this leaves us with a question: What is the role of a theology of Kṛṣṇa for Śaṅkara? We can say, broadly, that his answer clusters around two types of answers. One concerns loving devotion (*bhakti*) towards the self-declared God who is found in the person of Kṛṣṇa, and is interesting because of the way Śaṅkara takes such passages in the *Gītā* and makes them point to something else, even while never denying devotion and the complex of ritual life. The other concerns a theme familiar to us by now, which is the invocation of Kṛṣṇa's selfhood that Śaṅkara sees as key to the rationality of spiritual life, what we might call, in a cumbersome way, a gnoseo-phenomenology of consciousness. Let us look at each in turn.

Śaṅkara's location of devotion within a larger spiritual project of inquiry is not a simple denigration of the former. The second chapter of the *Gītā* is given over to gnostic discipline (*jñāna yoga*) and the discipline of ethico-ritual action (*karma yoga*). Kṛṣṇa says at 2.39 that, having taught of the discernment (*buddhi*) that comes from Sāṃkhya (the early school of metaphysics, which here stands for the path of knowledge, and therefore for gnostic discipline), he will now talk of what comes from Yoga (here, the school of consciousness-controlling practice, and implying the path of action, and therefore of ritual and worship), which will lead to freedom from bondage. But Śaṅkara goes out of his way to say (p. 30) that disciplined action (*karma yoga*) is not only the discipline of spiritual absorption (*samādhi yoga*) but also the performance (*anuṣṭhāna*) of rites (*karma*) with detachment (*niḥsaṅga*), for 'the adoration of God' (*īśvara-ārādhana*). This act of adoration leads to the discarding of all action itself, by the attainment of 'the gnosis caused by God's grace'.⁷⁸ Such gnosis is, of course, the realization in consciousness of the non-duality of self, God and *brahman*. Śaṅkara therefore maintains that the gnostic path is also a devotional one.

But for all that, the devotional path is more importantly also a gnostic one. Śaṅkara reconstructs as gnoseology Kṛṣṇa's teaching at 8.22 that the supreme person (*paraḥ puruṣa*) 'within whom stand all beings' (*antaḥsthāni bhūtāni*), is reached through singular (*ananyayā*) devotion (p. 133). First, he analyses '*puruṣa*' – 'person' – as '*puri śayanāt pūrṇatvāt*' – 'residing/ resting in the whole of the fortress (of the body, or heart or intellect – i.e., the human being)'. In other words, the supreme person (God) is that which is, supremely, the self of beings. Second, he crisply states that the singular 'devotion' (*bhakti*) encouraged here is that which is characterised as gnosis (*jñānalakṣaṇa*). So the love of God is a signifier of insight into non-duality. That is its true and ultimate function. One role for the theology of Kṛṣṇa is to transmute devotion into gnosis: the presence and promise of Kṛṣṇa permits the human response of love to become a path to self-realization, while Kṛṣṇa's grace is itself to be understood as the prompt for that realization.

This gnoseological re-reading of devotion permits Śaṅkara to discipline all loving worship within that inquiry into *brahman* that brings about the realization of non-duality. The worship that he takes to be of greatest value can be framed as a gnostic undertaking. He reads 9.15 as 'Others do homage to me by offering the sacrifice of the knowledge of oneness; [others worship my] diversity; [yet others, worship me] variously [as] facing in all directions.'⁷⁹ (As a contrast, in Laurie Patton's translation of this verse, we have: 'And others, through the sacrifice of wisdom, worship me as the oneness which is multiple, placed in many ways, facing all sides.'⁸⁰ In other words, this can be read quite naturally as a single, cumulative description, whereas Śaṅkara takes Kṛṣṇa to be talking of three classes of worshippers.) The three classes of worshippers are: those whose sacrificial performance is the attainment of the knowledge that '*brahman* is one'; those whose worship takes the form, 'Lord Viṣṇu alone abides (*avasthitaḥ*) in all the distinct (*bheda*) forms, like the Sun, the Moon, etc.'; and those who worship in many ways (*bahuprakārena*), thinking, 'Lord Viṣṇu alone resides variously in His omni-directional (*sarvatomukha*) cosmic form (*viśvarūpa*)' (p. 141). So, the most exalted form of worship is one in which it is taken that *brahman* is one; in the next level down, it is taken that Viṣṇu abides in all; and finally (i.e., at the most accessible and the least spiritually valuable level), there is the belief that Viṣṇu abides in many forms. While preserving the monotheism that we have noted before (which is not his concern), Śaṅkara hierarchizes the forms of worship according to their cognitive sophistication, as he sees it.

Another striking example of his view that worshipful action directed at Kṛṣṇa should only be taken to lead to insight into non-duality comes in his commentary on 12.12. There, Kṛṣṇa says that intellectual gnosis (*jñāna*) is superior (*śreyah*) to permanent exercise (*abhyāsa*); sustained reflection (*dhyāna*) surpasses gnosis; renunciation of the fruit of action (*karmaphalatyaṅga*) is better than reflection; and from such renunciation comes peace (*śānti*). The verse's apparent assertion of the renunciation of the fruit of action as the culminating form of the spiritual life (superior, as it were, to gnosis), should be understood (p. 180) as the most powerful path, in the sense that it is the one that is to be followed by those who are not able to do anything else. The power of the path does not lie in its spiritual exaltation, but rather in its being the most accessible and easily enabling. In the preceding verses, 8-11, Kṛṣṇa talks of those who fix their mind on him alone; advises those who cannot do that to strive for him through disciplined action; and finally, if they are unable even to discipline their action, then to at least renounce the fruit of their action.

In the exegesis relevant for our present purpose, Śaṅkara maintains that intellectual gnosis accompanied by reflection surpasses gnosis alone. In

the commentary, he argues that the disciplinary practice ‘characterised by focussing thought on the cosmic form of God’⁸¹ and the performance of actions with God as objective (*īśvarārthaṃ karmānuṣṭhā*) are premised on ‘a difference between self and God’ (*ātmaīśvarabheda*). So the discipline of action (*karmayoga*) is the result of unwisdom (*ajñāna*) and its practitioner is incapable of seeing non-difference (*abheda*). The discipline of action is unsuitable for the one who meditates on the imperishable (*akṣara*).

So, when, at 12.7, Kṛṣṇa says ‘I am their saviour’ (*teṣāmahaṃ samuddhartā*), he is talking of those who are dependent (*paratantra*) on God. Those who have become Godself (*īśvarsyātmabhūtā*) should be considered as having the form of the imperishable (*akṣarasvarūpa*) since they would have seen the non-difference between God and self. In that case, it would not be sensible to talk of their being objects of the saving act (*samuddharaṇakarmaviśaya*) of God. In this superbly imaginative passage, Śaṅkara demonstrates that a rigorous and uncompromising form of mystical ontologism or unitive mysticism is central to his theology. He neither rejects theological value in the spiritual life nor expounds a theology of salvific grace that sits within an unquestioned ontotheological framework. Śaṅkara’s Kṛṣṇa is the God through (and, given ultimate non-duality, with) whom *ātman/brahman*-realization is sought.

This brings us to the other role that Śaṅkara discerns for a theology of Kṛṣṇa, namely, the attainment of non-duality rendered possible (only?) through Kṛṣṇa’s universal selfhood. Kṛṣṇa’s grace is attained through gnostic realization and is expressed non-dualistically. At 9.22, Kṛṣṇa promises ‘*yogakṣema*’ to those who worship him while ‘thinking of none else but me’ (*ananyāścintayanto mām*). Śaṅkara interprets (p. 144) *yogakṣema* as two interrelated things; ‘*yoga* is attaining the unattained, and *kṣema* is the protection of it’. The attainment, of course, is non-duality, since ‘thinking of none else but me’ means, for Śaṅkara, ‘becoming non-separate, having realised the supreme deity, Nārāyaṇa, as the very self’.⁸² We have already seen that Śaṅkara by no means denies the role of worship and divine grace, albeit within a gnostic teleology. We also see now how these two things, while in apparent tension with each other, actually fit together: the gnosis is that confluence of consciousness – guarded and guaranteed by Kṛṣṇa for the worshipper – that is the realization of non-duality.

The connection between examination of the self and the exploration of being is, of course, an integral part of Christian theology’s assimilation of Greek philosophy; in fact, it is one of the dominant characteristics of onto-theology – ontotheology understood, not necessarily in the way Heidegger did in order to establish his own self-proclaimed originality, but plainly as the conception of an intimate connection between God and being, of at least an understanding of being in and through God (although not necessarily

taking Being to name God). ‘The idea of God as Spirit, pure Being without material parts, led classical Christian authors to approach the understanding of God largely through reflection on the self. In his *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine holds that human intelligence is the highest and best of human attributes. This intelligence is dependent upon a reality that is higher than itself, the spiritual, eternal and unchanging God (2:37–15:39). The soul’s knowledge of itself leads to knowledge of God, and to a true idea of being,’ point out Fiorenza and Kaufman.⁸³

Understood in this way, later Christian developments appear to point to a deepening of this methodology. In Aquinas, it seems plausible to think that there is a worked-out doctrine of theosis, a mystical union that is the final goal of the human being.⁸⁴ As Anna Williams says, for him the love that brings about union with God is meditation on God’s nature, a theological activity that is sharing in God’s being. (Of course, this union is between the human and God through God’s self-giving, a theme we will see much more appropriately comparable to Rāmānuja’s vision of God’s love, although he permits inquiry into being as no more than preparation for a loving relationship with God.) Two things strike us here in relation to what we have been learning about Śāṅkara: one is the idea that loving devotion (*bhakti*) is noetic, the thinking of God by the worshipper, and therefore directed towards gnosis on the worshipper’s part; the other is that such a relationship is possible because of the mapping of self and God through being.

Even while pointing out the centrality of this theosis to Thomism, Laurence Hemming has argued that, for a Heideggerian, there might well be a problem with the enquiry into the being of oneself becoming the inquiry into God’s being. Such an attempt is metaphysical, for it ‘makes the being of God the ground of the being of being human’. If so, this ‘displaces the ground of the being of being human from the very self that I am, whose being I can then enquire into, onto a being whose being is not transparently interrogable for me, namely God’.⁸⁵ The response to this (although perhaps not by a Thomist) has to be, I think, that the success of the inquiry lies not in the attainment of a metaphysical grasp of God’s being, but in God’s self-giving. However, we have a very different situation with Śāṅkara. It is not so much that Śāṅkara rules out Kṛṣṇa’s grace as playing a role in realization: the *Gītā*’s communication of Kṛṣṇa’s declarations of gracious giving are too many for that line of interpretation to be sustainable. And it is certainly the case that our love of Kṛṣṇa is, at any rate, noetic for Śāṅkara; we have seen that often enough. What is important is that Śāṅkara is not talking of a union of God’s being and the self, but the non-duality of the two.

The inquiry, in Advaita, is already rendered possible only because there is no ontological difference between God and self – ‘ontological’ both in

the standard sense of constitutive nature and in the Heideggerian sense of having the nature to comprehend, reflexively and recursively, one's own being. It is precisely gnosis – turning the attention of consciousness to illuminate consciousness itself – that is rendered possible by the fact that the conscious self is also the self that is God. God's selfhood is the self of all being, and that is why, at one and the same time, immediately and without transition, to attain God and to attain gnosis of true selfhood is also to (re-) attain non-duality.

In the middle of the famous commentary on 18.66 concerning Kṛṣṇa's culminating promise of salvation (which will occupy us in the last chapter), Śaṅkara states (p. 285) that freedom from entanglement with the less-than-real world of action comes to those 'who have taken refuge in the oneness of the Lord's quiddity ('own-form' (*svarūpa*)) and the self'.⁸⁶ This, then, is Śaṅkara's theology of Kṛṣṇa, and his account of its role within gnoseology. But it has always to be remembered that theology does not exhaust Śaṅkara's system; there is *brahman*. The *ātman* seeks to realize its non-duality with *brahman*, not (just) with God; but the person prays to God and God is *ātman* is *brahman*. The gnoseological search (*jijñāsa*) is not for God even with a theology, but for *brahman*. This combination, of course, has no Christian parallel. And it is important to keep that in mind, in order to not read him in Christian a/theological terms.

Self, God and *brahman*: Śaṅkara, theology and non-dualist metaphysics

Let us try and bring together the various, intertwined strands of Śaṅkara's thinking on Kṛṣṇa and *brahman* in the *Gītā* commentary. In contrast to his commentaries on the Upaniṣads and on the *Brahmasūtras* (which latter, after all, present themselves as concise *aides memoire* to the teachings of the former), the *Gītā* offers Śaṅkara the unique challenge of interpreting the presence of a robustly immanent, densely subjective and clearly self-declarative being, Kṛṣṇa, whose declarations advert to his supreme divinity. This is because, by contrast, the other texts on which he comments locate *brahman* as the nodal point of all explanation, and permit him to develop his broad theme of the non-duality of conscious presence condensed in the individuated self and the singular, permeating and originary principle that is *brahman*. Since *brahman* clearly occupies a significant position in the *Gītā*, it is not as if Śaṅkara is unable to extend his non-dualist conceptual vocabulary to it, but he has to do so *via* Kṛṣṇa. This chapter is an extended argument to

the effect that Śaṅkara should not be seen as trying to explain away Kṛṣṇa within the working out of the significance of *ātman-brahman*. Equally, I also point out that a swing to the other extreme of seeing Śaṅkara's position in the light of a wholly devotional theology of Kṛṣṇa is not sustainable, both because it is not possible to defend a personalistic conception of *brahman* (i.e. through taking Kṛṣṇa and *brahman* as just nomenclaturally different) and because Śaṅkara offers an emphatically gnostic reading of the nature and purpose of worship that does not sit easily with pietistic devotion. Instead, we have an account that is distinctive of Śaṅkara, and that too, the Śaṅkara of the *Gītā* commentary: a highly intellectual reading of devotion that nonetheless wholeheartedly endorses devotion to Kṛṣṇa; a sophisticated and balanced account of the nature of Kṛṣṇa as both the subject who is supremely being and as being itself which founds all beings; and circumscribing this theology, an overarching understanding of *brahman* as the ground or fount of being and non-being, that which ontologically permits beings and the ultimately non-being world to be what they are/are not.

We have, therefore, two radical steps in Śaṅkara's reading of the *Gītā*. The first is the non-duality of divine and human being through Kṛṣṇa's proclamation of his universal selfhood; and the second is the location of this non-duality within the overarching non-duality of *brahman* and being/non-being, which is not, as it were, spoken of, but ineluctably reached through inquiry into the conditions for the possibility of gnosis. Let us look at these in turn.

Self and God: Śaṅkara's mapping and Kṛṣṇa's declaration

Since the *Gītā* often has Kṛṣṇa say that he is the self of all beings, Śaṅkara interprets all the other statements of the relationship between God and human beings through this essential declaration. As we have seen, worship is understood as an epistemic quest, the attainment of knowledge of non-duality through systematic thinking of the nature of God (prompted here by Kṛṣṇa's own assurance of that nature). It is also teleologically gnostic; such understanding is meant to dissolve the phenomenology of existence, from the variegated experiences of the individuated and agonistic person into the consciousness of pure presence that is the truth of selfhood, a process that we will look at in detail when examining the nature of self in the *Gītā* commentaries. But it is not just the ontological truth of the non-duality of Kṛṣṇa and selves that prompts worship and permits gnosis, for it is Kṛṣṇa's grace that renders worship successful. Let us look again at the first half of the circle, which is Śaṅkara's mapping of divine and human selfhood, before we turn to the other half, namely, Kṛṣṇa's assurance that the mapping has salvific potency.

At 13.27, Kṛṣṇa says, ‘He sees [truly] who sees the supreme god (*parameśvara*) abiding (*tiṣṭhanta*) alike in all beings (*sarveṣu bhūteṣu*), not dying even as they die.’ Śaṅkara glosses (p. 209) *parameśvara* as the supreme god with regard to (*apekṣya*) body, senses, mind, intellect, the unmanifest (*avyakta*) and the self, who undyingly abides equally (*samam*) in all beings. This shows, he asserts, the absolute difference (*atyanta vailakṣaṇya*) between beings and the supreme god. How so? The change in the state of being described as ‘birth’ (*bhāvavikārāṇām janilakṣaṇaḥ*) is the root (*mūla*) of all other modifications; and all changes in states of being end in death/destruction (*sarve bhāvavikārāḥ vināśāntāḥ*). Beyond death (*vināśāt paraḥ*) there is no change. By saying that this final change in the state of being (*antya bhāvavikāra*) is absent in the supreme god, all modification is denied (*pratiṣiddha*) of him. ‘Therefore, it is established that the supreme god is completely other to all beings, is without particularity, is One.’⁸⁷ One who sees the supreme god thus (truly) sees. This is contrasted with those who see contrarily (*viparita*). Just as when, compared to those with the eye-defect called *timira* who see many moons, the one who sees the single moon correctly is said to ‘see (truly)’, so too: ‘the one who sees the one undivided self as described is distinguished from those who contrarily see many selves divided, by saying, “he alone sees”.’⁸⁸ This is another of those tightly crafted passages in Śaṅkara where what appears to be a conventional point about God’s otherness – signified by eternity – is quickly reconfigured in terms of non-dual, not-other selfhood. If God is simple, without particularity, free of modifications to the conditions of being, and therefore free of temporality, then obviously the world and worldly beings are other than God. God’s otherness is from the states of all beings, their changefulness that ends in the destruction of their particularity. But this otherful God is also not other, abiding alike in all beings. What is common to all beings is their being, which is Kṛṣṇa’s presence in and as self in them. As the one self that is the self of all being, God is to be distinguished from the manyness of beings, but is not different from their oneness.

Such an interpretation permits Śaṅkara to read Kṛṣṇa as himself guaranteeing the culmination of non-dual gnosis in *brahman*, for at 13.30, Kṛṣṇa affirms, ‘When one sees the diversity of states of being abiding in the one, and their expanding from that alone, one attains *brahman*.’⁸⁹ Śaṅkara underlines this affirmation (p. 210) by echoing the Upaniṣadic teaching of non-dual *brahman*: ‘one attains *brahman*’ simply means ‘one becomes *brahman* itself’ (*brahmaiva bhavati*), and one does so when one sees, as *Chandogya Upaniṣad* 7.26.1 says, that the self is breath (*prāṇa*), hope (*āśā*), memory (*smara*), space (*ākāśa*), light (*teja*), water (*āpa*), manifestation (*āvirbhāva*) and de-manifestation (*tirobhāva*), and food (*anna*). So, for

Śaṅkara, God is self, and self is *brahman*. (As we will see, Rāmānuja has no difficulty with identifying self and *brahman*, but he interprets the latter quite differently in relation to Kṛṣṇa, an interpretation that will be central to his radical theology.)

Śaṅkara is aware that this non-dualism makes for a curious theodicy, and attempts to provide an answer. Our concern is not really about the effectiveness of this theodicy but the commitment to non-duality evident in it. 13.31 asserts, “The immutable (*avyaya*) supreme self (*paramātman*) although in the body (*śarīra*), does not act (*na karoti*) and is not stained (*na lipyate*).” The mention of ‘stain’ leads to an objection (p. 211): Who acts in the body and is stained (affected negatively)? If it is another (*anya*) than the supreme self who, as the embodied one (*dehi*) who acts and is stained, then what becomes of the statement in 13.2, ‘Know me as the knower of the field’, which shows the oneness of the knower of the field and God (*kṣetrajñeśvaraikatva*)? However, if there is no other embodied being than God (*atha nāstīśvarāt anyah dehi*), then who acts and is stained (for it could then not be God)? Or is it that there is no supreme one (*paro vā nāsti*)? In a few swift steps, Śaṅkara sums up the problem. That something is stained, through moral and existential failures (evil and suffering) is undeniable, and it is the body that is so identified. Kṛṣṇa contrasts this with the supreme self that is not stained thus. A theodicy concerning a God who is completely other to worldly being would seek to answer how such a God permitted the stain. For Śaṅkara, the problem is strikingly different, as can be seen in his honest presentation of it. His answer involves a fundamental Advaitic claim about beings in their limited being. Śaṅkara responds to the objection by saying that Kṛṣṇa himself has already pointed out at 5.14 that what ‘sets out’ or acts is essential nature (*svabhāvas tu pravartate*); and, Śaṅkara says, that essential nature – the essential nature of beings in the world, who are stained – is unwisdom (*avidyā*). As we will see in his account of the self in human being, unwisdom is the taking of oneself to be an individuated being among other beings, the world as ultimately existent, and God as utterly other. Worldly transaction (*vyavahāra*) is possible only because the human being’s essential nature is just unwisdom (*avidyāmātrasvabhāva*); it is this clouded sense of separate beingness within a body that generates action, thereby constructing an individuated entity that becomes stained. The supreme self (*paramātman*) – that is to say, the self as the essential presence of Kṛṣṇa, being itself rather than particular being – is not ultimately the acting, stained entity. So, it is by inscribing all empirical reality to this primal ignorance of being as such that Śaṅkara offers a non-dualist theodicy for Godself.

We should remember that this exploration of the ontology of the non-duality of God and self is only one half of what Śaṅkara says about

Kṛṣṇa; the other half, which completes his theology, is that the attainment of non-duality is guaranteed by God's grace. As Kṛṣṇa promises (9.29): 'Those who adore me with devotion, they are in me and I in them.'⁹⁰ Śaṅkara makes clear the relationship involved here. He understands Kṛṣṇa to be saying, 'I exist in them not through the constraint of attachment (*rāganimitta*); but by their own-being (*svabhāva*)' (p. 146). This is the ontological core of the salvific promise. The essential nature or own-being of beings is both characterisable as unwisdom and the locus of Kṛṣṇa's presence. Where we are most chained to the world there Kṛṣṇa is – in us, but more significantly, as us – so that we may be free.

As we have seen before, it is striking that Śaṅkara neither concedes that our *telos* is anything but gnostic non-duality nor asserts that Kṛṣṇa's grace alone takes us to our self-realization. An Advaitic reading of the *Gītā* requires *brahman* to be the final explanation, but Kṛṣṇa is required to provide it. Kṛṣṇa declares himself, whereas *brahman* is anonymous to the world of revelation. Kṛṣṇa, as paradigmatic self that enselves being, offers the right balance to human inquiry for, in the *Gītā* according to Śaṅkara, the gnosis that results from inquiry is guaranteed only after it is acknowledged that God has provided the means to inquiry, by a self-declared presence (that prompts, for Śaṅkara, the only proper devotion, namely, the noetic worship through which gnosis is attained).

But still, it all ends, as it began, with *brahman* – or else there would be no Advaita. Śaṅkara does not shirk from accepting a salvific theology of Kṛṣṇa; but nevertheless, there is something beyond the theology which circumscribes it and makes his Advaita ultimately an inquiry into reality beyond the theology. In the end, Śaṅkara is looking for a sort of transmetaphysics, which seeks to get to the ground that renders being possible.

Kṛṣṇa's signification of *brahman*: the asymmetric mystery of non-duality

At the heart of Śaṅkara's *Gītā* is the elusiveness and mystery of the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and *brahman*, for there is no direct equation in the *Gītā* between the two, and none in Śaṅkara's commentary apart from on one intriguing occasion (on 14.27, to which we will soon turn). Over the course of the commentary, the general impression accumulates of *brahman* encompassing but exceeding God. For example, as we saw in the extended discussion in the first section, especially with regard to 2.16, Śaṅkara points to *brahman* as containing but exceeding being and non-being, the immutable and the mutable. But Kṛṣṇa also undeniably characterises himself as immutable; as we saw in the previous section, on 13.27, modification

characterizes beings, while it cannot apply to God. Divine immutability, of course, is the cornerstone of most pre-modern theologies. Compare with Augustine, who says, ‘When the words of God reach holy Moses through the angel, to his question concerning his name ... the answer was “I am who I am” ...’, as if, when compared to him who truly is because he is immutable, the things which do change were not; this was vigorously defended and recommended with the greatest possible care by Plato.⁹¹ Yet, we have seen that Śaṅkara takes reasonable care to say that *brahman* exceeds both the mutable and the immutable, and this despite the fact that he does write loosely and sometimes contradictorily across the length of the commentary.

Śaṅkara’s God is not a philosopher’s God, but a theologian’s – and yet the theology is subjected to a transmetaphysics of *brahman*. Of course, Kṛṣṇa is not to be dis-identified from *brahman*, for *brahman* is all, and we have seen how the realization of *brahman* can be approached only through and in Kṛṣṇa. But non-duality is asymmetric: *brahman* cannot be exhausted by non-duality with Kṛṣṇa or *ātman*. Śaṅkara’s Kṛṣṇa speaks of *brahman* but indirectly. As we have seen in the previous section, at 13.30, Kṛṣṇa points to, rather than identifies with, *brahman*: ‘When one sees the diversity of states of being abiding in the one, and their expanding from that alone, one attains *brahman*.’ Now, if *brahman* were to be understood as the free self, distinct from and subordinate to Kṛṣṇa, as Rāmānuja does, that would be a different matter. But if, as Śaṅkara does, the Upaniṣadic non-duality of *ātman* and *brahman* is preserved even while Kṛṣṇa is repeatedly identified as the *ātman* of all, then either *brahman* is – symmetrically – Kṛṣṇa, or exceeds him. At 13.30, Kṛṣṇa can seem, for Śaṅkara, to be ‘sending’ (cognitively, as it were) the *ātman* through him to *brahman*, implying the latter option.

But there is one passage in which Śaṅkara struggles to express the very limits of language in the striving towards *brahman*, even when that striving is graced by Kṛṣṇa. At 14.27, Kṛṣṇa says, ‘I am the support (*pratiṣṭha*) of *brahman*, the immortal and imperishable, and of the everlasting *dharma*, and of absolute joy.’⁹² Śaṅkara’s first step (p. 222) is to point out that the ‘I’ (*aham*) of Kṛṣṇa is the inmost self (*pratyagātman*). The implication is that, while the authority of the claim comes from its being spoken by Kṛṣṇa, it applies as much to each human being as it does to him. This is made clear soon after. Explaining the phrase in the previous verse, ‘becomes competent to become *brahman* (*brahma bhūyāya kalpate*)’, Śaṅkara says, ‘Since the inmost self is the support of the supreme self, which is intrinsically eternal, etc., through complete gnosis, it is ascertained as the supreme self.’⁹³ But the trickier point here is the notion of ‘support’ (or ‘the underlying place’, ‘the base’). This becomes acute when Śaṅkara then goes on to explain the relationship between God and *brahman* – the nearest he gets to it – while stressing

non-duality. 'The power of God through which, to bless devotees and so on, the *brahman* that is supported, comes forth – I am that power which is *brahman*, the power and the possessor of the power not being separate.'⁹⁴ For Śaṅkara, God's supporting *brahman* is not a matter of *brahman* having God as its foundation; on the contrary, God supports *brahman* as an auxiliary might support the principal. In similar manner, the inmost self supports, in the sense of expressing in its being, the supreme self. So Śaṅkara inverts our expectation of the direction in which the asymmetry of 'support' runs. God's being blesses being, and thus the interpersonal relationship at the heart of a theology is secured. But God derives from *brahman*, for God supports *brahman* in the sense of being the personal bridge to beings. God is the power of *brahman* by which being is being and beings have being and are blessed to so realize themselves. But, as the tenet of non-duality affirms, there is no difference between God and *brahman*, for there is nothing other than *brahman*.

This is a radical circumspection of Godliness, for God is not the ultimate point of Advaitic inquiry; but Śaṅkara makes the point quickly and circumspectly. He then rounds off the commentary on this verse with another enigmatic interpretive alternative, because he cannot leave the vanishing point of ultimacy so robustly described as this verse does, as immortal, as absolute joy, and the like. He therefore takes Kṛṣṇa to be saying, 'Or the reference of the word '*brahman*' [in this verse] can mean the *brahman* that is conceptualised. Of that *brahman*, unconceptualised, I myself – and none else – am that which is the support.'⁹⁵ Even the *brahman* described as immortal, of everlasting order and absolute joy, while reaching the limits of language remains within those limits, so the role of Kṛṣṇa in being the support for our attainment of such a *brahman* seems somehow to be limited too. If God is the power through which we realize our supreme self, it is that self, which is none other than *brahman*, that must escape our language. God should take us beyond language, bound as language is to the forms of our current being. So Śaṅkara takes Kṛṣṇa to be saying that what can be said is said of *brahman* as we conceptualise it, in our language and our imagination. But that which God supports for our realization is *brahman* beyond understanding, beyond language, beyond concepts. The gnosis by which the inmost self is realized as the supreme self (who is God) is also more than just the realization of reality at maximal understanding – for that takes us only to the conceptualised *brahman*. God – and God alone – takes us beyond our understanding, beyond our becoming, to *brahman* – that which we feebly call the unconceptualised *brahman*.

The great mystery of the God of Advaita's inquiry into *brahman* still remains, although we have tried to draw out what we can from Śaṅkara's

ingenious, often breathtakingly unconventional (and to this day, hardly understood and much misinterpreted) reading of the nature of Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā*. We have to make what we will of the interpretive conundrum in Śaṅkara's description of Kṛṣṇa as the signifier (*abhidheya*) of *brahman*, in the introduction to the commentary: "This sacred text, the *Gītā*, while particularly revealing the ... ritual cosmic order having the highest good as its purpose and the supreme reality called Vāsudeva – being that signifies *brahman* in excess – as its subject matter, is shown to have a special purpose and connection."⁹⁶

- 15 Paul Hacker is the most famous exponent of the theory that Śaṅkara was a Vaiṣṇava; see Hacker 1995.
- 16 van Buitenen 1956; p. 59.
- 17 Grant 2000; pp. 160–3. For the developed treatment of her position, see Grant 1991.
- 18 Ram-Prasad 2001, p. 166; *passim* for a fuller treatment of the relationship between *ātman*, *jīva* and *brahman* in Śaṅkara.
- 19 For an exploration of this Śrīvaiṣṇava theology, especially as the later tradition understands Rāmānuja, see Clooney 1996, 2008c.
- 20 The classic formulation in modern Western scholarship on access and transcendence in Rāmānuja is Carmen 1974, pp. 77–87.

Chapter 1

- 1 *nāsate vidyate bhāvo nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ/ ubhayaorapi dṛṣṭo'ntastvanayosta ttvadarśibhiḥ //*.
- 2 *na, sarvatra buddhidvayopalabdheḥ – sadbuddhirasadbuddhiriti. yadvaiṣayā buddhiḥ na vyabharati tat sat, yadvaiṣayā vyabharati tadasatiti. sadasadvibhāge buddhitantre sthite, sarvatra dve buddhiḥ sarverupalabhyate;* Śaṅkara 1950. All references to the commentary are to this edition, although the 1935 edition of multiple commentaries has also been consulted.
- 3 This is an early articulation of the Advaitic point that 'existence' is not some quality or property of things; an argument developed in detail several centuries later by Śrī Harṣa, it bears an uncanny resemblance to and anticipation of twentieth century Western debates about the predicative nature of 'exists' and its Kantian roots. See Ram-Prasad 2002: III.2.
- 4 *tasmāt dehādeḥ dvandvasya ca sakāraṇasyāsataḥ na vidyate bhāva iti. tathā sataḥ cātmano'bhāvo'vidyamānatā na vidyate sarvatrāvyabhicārādityavocāma;* p. 17.
- 5 *taditi sarvanāma, sarvaṃ ca brahma; tasya nāma taditi. tadbhāvaḥ tattvaṃ, brahmaṇaḥ yāthātmyam;* pp. 17–8.
- 6 John Grimes has patiently explored the parallels between Śaṅkara's *brahman* and Heidegger's Being, as also, inevitably, the fundamental differences between them (Grimes: 2007, orig. 1989). Apart from my reluctance to see *brahman* as Being (and therefore comparable), I also take my task here to be different, in that it is not comparative in any straightforward way. Rather, it is to present a philosophical and theological project that is cross-culturally accessible, perhaps even intercultural in conceptual content, seeking to interpret Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja through categories intrinsic to their thought but utilising language and ideas from the developed contemporary traditions of Western philosophy and Christian theology.

- 7 *kūṭasthaḥ kūṭaḥ rāṣiḥ rāṣiriva sthitaḥ. athavā kūṭaḥ māyā vañcanā jihmatā kuṭīlateti paryāyaḥ ... saṃsārabijānantyāt na kṣaratity akṣara ucyate*; p. 230.
- 8 'If we examine the emergence of beings into phenomenological visibility, there is an implicit difference between the dynamic *showing* and the more passive *lasting* of those beings – a difference Heidegger will later formalize as that between 'presencing' (*anwesen*) and 'presence' (*Anwesenheit*). In other words, in the process whereby beings come into being, linger, and pass away, we can distinguish between their dynamic emerging and disappearing, on the one hand, and the more static aspect of that which lasts, on the other;' Thomson 2000: p. 317.
- 9 *parastasmāttu bhāvo'nyo'nyo'vyakto'vyaktātasanātanaḥ/ yaḥ sa bhūteṣu naśyastu na vinaśyati*; 8.19, p. 133.
- 10 *tvamakṣaraṃ sadasattatparaṃ yat.*
- 11 *na me pārthāsti kartavyaṃ triṣu lokeṣu kiṃcana/ nānavāptamavāptavyaṃ karta eva ca karmaṇi//.*
- 12 For a study of the exemplary Christian use of *via eminentiae*, in Aquinas, see Elders 1990: chapter 6.
- 13 *ahameva bhagavān vāsudevaḥ nā anyo'smi*; p. 122.
- 14 *sarvātmānaṃ mām pratipadyate*; *ibid.*
- 15 *ahamātmā guḍākeśa sarvabhūtāśayasthitaḥ.*
- 16 Śaṅkara is more concerned with the ontology of other deities elsewhere, primarily in the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*. For an insightful analysis of the mediatory role of such entities, invoking too a striking comparison with angels in Aquinas, see Clooney 2000.
- 17 *avyaktaṃ vyaktimāpannaṃ manyante māmabuddhayaḥ/ paraṃ bhāvamajānanto māmavyayamanuttamam//*; p. 124.
- 18 This is explored through other commentaries of Śaṅkara in Ram-Prasad 2010: 226–32.
- 19 *kathaṃ tu punarucyate'sau māmātmaiti? vibhaja dehādīsaṃdhātā tasmīnaḥkāmādhyaṛopya lokabuddhimanusaraṇa vyapadiśati māmātmaiti na punarātmano'tmā'nya iti lokavadajānaḥ*; p. 138.
- 20 Cp. Meister Eckhart (1979–81: Sermon 28), who says, 'The world 'I' is proper to none, but to God in his oneness'.
- 21 *paraṃ brahma vāsudevākhyam*; p. 250.
- 22 Generally and correctly, *prakṛti* is translated as 'material nature', especially in the Sāṃkhya school whose early ideas heavily influence the *Gītā*, but at 7.5, the *Gītā* itself – quite apart from Śaṅkara – talks of the higher (*parā*) *prakṛti* being of individual beings (*jīvabhūtām*) who bear up (*dhāryate*) the world (*jagat*); therefore, *prakṛti* is not materiality alone, but all limitation.
- 23 *māyāvinam svātmabhūtāṃ sarvātmānā*; p. 121.
- 24 *na hiśvaraḍvayaṃ saṃbhavatyanekēśvaratve vyavahārānupapateḥ*; p. 172.
- 25 Gilson 1936: p. 47.
- 26 *bhagavata īśvarasya nārāyaṇākhyasya vibhūtisaṃkṣepa uktaḥ viśiṣṭopādihikṛtaḥ 'yadādityagataṃ tejaḥ' (15.12) ityādinā. athādhunā*

- tasyaiva kṣarākṣropādhīpravibhaktatayā nirupādhikasya kevalasya tattva nirdidhārayiṣayottare ślokā ārabhyante*; p. 229.
- 27 *paramaścāsau dehādyavidyākṛtātmabhyaḥ*; p. 230.
- 28 *ātmā ca sarvabhūtānāṃ pratyakcetanah*.
- 29 *īśvaraḥ sarvajñah nārāyaṇākhyā īśanaśīlah*; *ibid*.
- 30 Heidegger 1975 p. 86.
- 31 Rāmānuja, p. 300/299.
- 32 *phalasaṅgarahitamabhimānavarjitamaḥ karomīti*; p. 139.
- 33 Quoted by Paul Tillich, in Tillich 1959: p. 15.
- 34 *na kaścidātmānaṃ vināśayitum śaknotiśvaro'pi. ātmā hi brahma*; p. 18.
- 35 Kerr 2002: p. 94.
- 36 Kerr *ibid.*; Kearney 2001: 155.
- 37 *brahmaśabdavācyaṭvāt savikalpakaṃ brahma*; p. 222.
- 38 *tasya brahmaṇaḥ nirvikalpako'hameva nānyaḥ pratiṣṭhāśrayaḥ*; *ibid*.
- 39 Kearney 2001: 157.
- 40 Fiorenza and Kaufman 1998: 145.
- 41 Hacker 1995(4) pp. 57–100.
- 42 *ibid.*; p. 96.
- 43 *mayā'pakṛṣṭaṃ parityaktaṃ nirātmakaṃ śūnyaṃ hi tat syāt*; p. 157.
- 44 For this definition of pantheism, see Owen 1971: 74.
- 45 *mayā tatamidaṃ sarvaṃ jagadavyaktamūrtinā/ matasthāni sarvabhūtāni na cāhaṃ teṣvavasthitah*// He uses the same phrase elsewhere too, as at 7.12, but he says little interesting about it there.
- 46 *samyakekenā'tmanā vyāpnoṣi*; p. 171.
- 47 *tvayā vinābhūtaṃ na kiñcidasti*; *ibid*.
- 48 Otto 1970.
- 49 Isayeva 1993: 117–18.
- 50 For his analysis of this proposition, see Latin Works I in Maurer 1974: pp. 93–104.
- 51 Colledge and McGinn 1981: 32–3.
- 52 *ibid*. The following discussion is largely based on this analysis by Colledge and McGinn.
- 53 Colledge and McGinn 1981: 33.
- 54 *ibid.*; p. 34.
- 55 Kearney uses this term, and then refers to Eckhart: Kearney 2001: fn. 11, p. 174, drawing attention to the in/famous, 'God's isness (*Istigkeit*) is my isness'.
- 56 Gresich quotes Sermon 77 of Eckhart's German works, Greisch 2001: 254.
- 57 Kearney 2001: 157.
- 58 In Śaṅkara's thinking, while the notion of being clearly plays an important role, and is articulated through his understanding of Kṛṣṇa, the key term that brings them together is self, the essence of what it is to be. He does not particularly focus on identifying Kṛṣṇa as being itself ('Being'), although such a claim would not be inconsistent with his position. Contrast this

topography of defining divine being with the rather different one in the history of thought pointed out by Paul Ricœur, where the encounter of Greek metaphysics and biblical religious thought led medieval philosophers to reach 'the idea that Being is the proper name of God and this name designates God's very essence' (Ricœur 1988: 353).

- 59 *bhūtānām parameśvarasya cātyanta vilakṣaṇya pradarśanārthaṃ*; p. 209.
- 60 *tasmāt sarvabhūtāḥ vilakṣaṇyamatyantameva parameśvarasya siddham nirviśeṣatvamekatvaṃ ca*; *ibid.*
- 61 *na tadasti yat vastu 'asti' śabdena nocyate*; p. 198.
- 62 *astibuddhyanugatapratyayaaviśayaṃ syāt*; *ibid.*
- 63 *viditāviditānyatvaśrūteravaśyavijñeyārthapratipādanaparatvāt*; *ibid.*
- 64 *na kenacit śabdenocyate'tyuktaṃ*; *ibid.*
- 65 For Śāṅkara's non-realism, see Ram-Prasad 2001: chapters 1–3.
- 66 For a succinct outline of Aquinas on divine simplicity, see Kerr 2002: pp. 76–7. He illustrates Aquinas' position by reference to sections of the *Summa Theologiae*.
- 67 *ibid.*
- 68 De Smet 2010, 133.
- 69 Mojsisch 1998: 69.
- 70 As quoted in Mojsisch 1998: 70.
- 71 *ibid.*; p. 71.
- 72 *ibid.*; p. 72.
- 73 I am not making the claim that the only interpretation of creation *ex nihilo* should be in the form that Śāṅkara dismisses, only that this is the reason he does. A comparison of medieval Christian and classical Hindu conceptions of creation is a task for another time.
- 74 Summerell 1998: p129, describing Heidegger's position.
- 75 *ibid.*; p. 132.
- 76 Prudhomme 1997: p. 136, quoting Heidegger in his later work, *Humanismusbrief*.
- 77 Elders 1990: pp. 48–9.
- 78 *īśvaraprasādanimittajñāna*.
- 79 *jñānayaajñena cāpyanye yajanto māmupāsate/ekatvena prthaktvena bahudhā viśvatomukham*.
- 80 Patton 2008: 105.
- 81 *viśvarūpaiśvare cetahsamādhānalakṣaṇaḥ*.
- 82 *apṛthagbhūtāḥ paraṃ devaṃ nārāyaṇamātmatvena gatāḥ santaḥ*; p. 143.
- 83 Fiorenza and Kaufman 1998: 146. For the relevant passage in Augustine, see Augustine 1993.
- 84 Williams 1999; Kerr 2002: 149–61.
- 85 Hemming 2003: 88.
- 86 *bhagavatsvarūpātmaikatvaśaraṇānām*.
- 87 *tasmāt sarvabhūtāḥ vilakṣaṇyamatyantameva parameśvarasya siddham nirviśeṣatvamekatvaṃ ca*.

- 88 *ekamavibhaktaṃ yathoktamātmānaṃ yaḥ paśyati saḥ
vibhaktānekātmaviparītadarśibhyaḥ viśiṣyate saiva paśyatīti.*
- 89 *yadā bhūtapṛthagbhāvamekasthamanupaśyati/ tataiva ca vistāraṃ brahma
sampadyate tadā.*
- 90 *ye bhajanti tu mām bhaktyā mayi te teṣu cāpyaham.*
- 91 I have slightly altered the translation Marion gives; Civ. 8.11 (BA 34.270–2)
Quoted by Jean-Luc Marion (2008: 171).
- 92 *brahmano hi pratiṣṭhāhamamṛtasyāvyayasya ca/ śāśvatasya ca dharmasya
sukhasyaikāntikasya ca.*
- 93 *amṛtādisvabhāvasya paramātmanaḥ pratyagātmā pratiṣṭhā samyagjñānena
paramātmatayā niściyate.*
- 94 *yayā ca īśvaraśaktyā bhaktānugrahādīprajayā brahma pratiṣṭhate
pravartate sā śaktiḥ brahmaivāhaṃ śaktiśaktimātorananyatvāt.*
- 95 *athavā brahmaśabdavācyaṭvāt savikalpakaṃ brahma. tasya brahmaṇaḥ
nirvikalpako'hameva nānyaḥ pratiṣṭhāśrayaḥ.*
- 96 *imaṃ ... dharmam niḥśreyasaprayojanaṃ paramārthatattvaṃ ca
vāsudevākhyam parabrahmābhidheyabhūtaṃ viśeṣata abhivyañjayat
viśiṣṭaprayojanasambandhābhidheyavat gītāśāstraṃ; p. 3.*

Chapter 2

- 1 My claim in such a project would be that the elaborate architectonic of a *brahman* at once the abstract principle of the *Brahmasūtras* (and the *Upaniṣads*) as well as the richly charactered Nārāyaṇa of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism is simply set aside in the *Gītā* commentary. Freed of having to talk of Nārāyaṇa through *brahman*, Rāmānuja here offers a daring reworking of *brahman* that perhaps would not or should not count as Vedānta at all, in the sense in which the Vedānta is understood as meditation on the ultimate explanatory power of *brahman*. To bring out this overwhelmingly important feature of the *Gītā* commentary (without contrast to the *brahman*-oriented texts) is the task of this chapter.
- 2 I thank Krishnan Ram-Prasad for alerting me to this possibility.
- 3 Rāmānuja n.d./2004 have both been consulted and page references follow that order; all translations are my own.
- 4 Śāṅkara 1950. Any further references to Śāṅkara's commentary will be to this edition.
- 5 *nāsate vidyate bhāvo nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ/ubhayaorapi dṛṣṭo'ntastvanayosta
ttvadarśibhiḥ //*
- 6 *asato dehasya sadbhāvo na vidyate sataścātmano nāsadbhāvaḥ; p. 69/43.*
- 7 *vināśasvabhāvo hyasattvaḥ; avināśasvabhāvaśca sattvaḥ.*
- 8 *dehātmasvabhāvājñānamohitasya tanmohaśāntaye hyubhayornāśitvānāśitva
rūpasvabhāvavivekaiva vaktavyaḥ; p. 70/44.*
- 9 *karma brahmodbhavaṃ viddhi brahmākṣarasamudbhavam/.*

Divine Self, Human Self

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