

The Concept of Brahman in Shankaracharya's Philosophy : Exploration for Liberation Through Absolute Knowledge

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Abstract: Adi Shankaracharya's Philosophy is erect on the Upanishads and the concept of Advaita, meaning "not two"; he developed a philosophical system known as Advaita Vedanta. It relies on the concept that Atman and Brahman are identical. He stated that the individual soul, Atman, is identical to the ultimate soul, Brahman. The ultimate aim of life is to attain self-realization and grasp this non-dual reality. Adi Shankaracharya believed that an individual's soul and the soul of the supreme being resemble waves and the sea. Although the waves appear distinct from those of the ocean, both consist of water. Similarly, Atman and Brahman might appear distinct, yet they are fundamentally the same entity. Both names signify the same concept that has always existed. The Atman thinks it is distinct from Brahman due to its lack of understanding. Yet his Advaita Vedanta theory reveals a truth that transcends binary perspectives. Shankaracharya used three principal arguments to support for the Advaita perspective. The initial argument stems from the notion that consciousness is unified. He believed that all forms of life possess the same fundamental consciousness. Brahman refers to this all-encompassing consciousness. Numerous instances exist in the world where fundamental truths remain constant despite change. An example is ice transforming into water and then gas, while hydrogen and oxygen remain unchanged. Similarly, every soul appears distinct, but it is essentially the supreme Brahman. They utilized the impossibility of infinite regress as a point of contention. He stated that no soul can be fundamentally distinct from Brahman, for if it were, there would be an infinite number of souls. This cannot occur. The most fundamental concept, or the ultimate reality in existence, is Brahman. He stated that the sole method to comprehend that Atman and Brahman are identical is through knowledge of them. Self-awareness eliminates ignorance and disconnection, making it difficult to perceive this clearly. This understanding is further enhanced through hands-on experience. One attains liberation only upon realizing the oneness of the individual soul and the Supreme Reality.

Keywords: Advaita, Illusion, Brahman, Tatasthalaksana, Svarupalaksana, Libration.

Introduction : Sri Adi Shankaracharya was born in 788 A.D. at Kalati, Kerala, to Shivaguru and Aryamba. At a young age, he embraced asceticism and encountered his guru, Govinda Bhagavatpada, along the banks of the Narmada River, with whom he studied for four years. Govinda Bhagavatpada instructed Shankara in the deep philosophy of Advaita and encouraged him to compose a philosophical commentary on the Vedanta Sutras, or Brahma Sutras, then interpreted in diverse theological ways. Later, Shankara traveled to Varanasi and authored commentaries on the Brahma Sutras, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita. He journeyed across India on foot three times, from Nepal to Rameshwaram, spreading the universal teachings of Advaita in key educational hubs, sites of worship, and royal capitals. Sankaracharya's Advaita philosophy is profound, exquisite, and unique. It is a framework with strong concepts and complicated logic. It is quite fascinating, inspiring, and encouraging. It represents the most courageous, profound, and nuanced mode of thinking ever proposed. Shankara possessed a complete and flawless mindset. Sri Sankara was a remarkable and influential spirit. He excelled at applying logic effectively and was among the greatest thinkers of all time. He was the wisest individual I've ever encountered and represented a manifestation of Lord Siva among the deities. Numerous individuals in the East and the West have discovered solace, tranquility, and illumination in his concepts. Western intellects submit to the lotus feet of Sri Sankara. Many individuals have discovered peace, hope, joy, wisdom, perfection, freedom, and solace in his ideas, including those who were deeply sorrowful or in pain. People around the globe respect his perspective on matters. Shankara desired that his followers not only contemplate his Advaita philosophy but also embody it in their lives.

Adi Shankaracharya emphasized that rituals hold little significance and do not bring about liberation. The main idea of life is to discover who you are by differentiating between what is genuine and what is not genuine. When a person understands that they are God, they can view the world and others with the same level of love and wonder. In all things, they perceive the ultimate self. His concept of lacking two sides provides us with a limited perspective of reality. It unifies all paradoxes by demonstrating that self and other, soul and body, mind and matter are ultimately one. It provides a logical foundation for religious concepts such as the notion of Ishwara or the personal God.

Advaita Vedanta desires harmony among all individuals and cultures. The most important thing in the Advaita-Vedanta philosophy is to respect nature and see that everything is one.¹ Advaita Vedanta is one of the six principal schools of Indian philosophy, asserting that the Vedas are the foremost texts in existence. The Brahmasutra Bhashya, Bhagavad-Gita, and Upanishads are likewise essential texts in this tradition. Collectively, they are referred to as the Prasthantrayi.² In Advaita Vedanta, Brahman is regarded as the sole reality.

Brahman is considered to transcend language. Titles, forms, duration, distance, and ideas cannot define it. Attempting to clarify it is merely an effort to simplify it to a level that individuals can grasp. In Advaita Vedanta, the Atman, or self, and Brahman are considered identical. Atman and Brahman are identical, just as a wave and the sea. Therefore, beneath the disguise of different names and forms lies a singular ultimate reality known as Brahman or the Atman. The Rig Veda, states-
'Ekam Sat VipraBahuda Vadanti'³

.....That ultimate truth is one, known by the wise as many.

The distinction between various names and forms arises from a concept known as Maya, Avidya or the universal deception. We can distinguish between a bowl, a glass, and a flowerpot despite them all being crafted from the same substance, "mud." Thanks, Maya. Similarly, we consider men, women, animals, trees, rivers, and other entities as distinct due to cosmic error, yet fundamentally, they are all the nondual Brahman, as nothing exists beyond Brahman.

The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy describes environmental ethics as:

"A discipline of philosophy that studies the moral relationship between the human and the non-Human world"⁴

It's not that Indians are bound by superstition or rigid forms; they simply have a profound awareness that beneath every name and form lies a singular divine energy known as "Brahma." The sacred Bhagavad Gita contains these words from Lord Krishna:

"An enlightened one is he who sees me in the wise, in a cow, in a dog, in an elephant, in an ant And in an outcast"

- BG 5.18: Chapter 5, Verse 18

Thus, Advaita Vedanta views a human not as an individual but as a general component of nature expected to operate according to Dharma. Dharma in this context should not be mistaken for religion.

The Aspects of Advaita Vedanta:

Maya is the intricate force of deception that originates from Brahman. It presents Brahman as the material world in two distinct forms, referred to as Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman. Shankara stated that Nirguna Brahman is not an individual. Only when it is linked to Maya does it transform into a personal God (Saguna

¹ Bhajanananda, S., & Mission, R. (2010). Four basic principles of Advaita Vedanta. Prabuddha bhārata, 27, 9-15.

² Rangaswami, S. (Ed.). (2012). The Roots of Vedānta: Selections from Śāṅkara's Writings. Penguin Books India.

³ Tularam, G. A. Vedic literature and Swami Dayananda Saraswati: a revival of the ancient Vedic tradition.

⁴ Cimatti, F. (Cimatti, F. (2016). Beyond the human/non-human dichotomy: the philosophical problem of human Animality. Humanimalia, 7(2), 35-55.

Brahman).⁵ Saguna Brahman and Nirguna Brahman are identical. Nonetheless, Nirguna Brahman is not the counterpart of Saguna Brahman, nor is the latter the opposite. If they were, it would contradict all that Advaita Vedanta teaches. For the devotees' religious worship, the same Nirguna Brahman manifests as Saguna Brahman. From various perspectives, it is the same Truth. The supreme Brahman is Nirguna Brahman, representing Brahman from the transcendental perspective (Paramarthika). The lower Brahman is Saguna Brahman, representing Brahman from a relative perspective (Vyavaharika). A key role of Maya is to "conceal" Brahman from ordinary individuals, while the other role is to present the material world as its substitute. Maya is often described as ineffable due to the fundamental reality underlying sensory experiences. Perception remains concealed. This remains accurate despite the fact that all the data we receive from our five senses is Maya. Another reason it is considered perplexing is that it is neither completely authentic nor entirely fabricated. Maya resides in Brahman, yet Brahman remains untouched by Maya's illusion. This is akin to the way the swan and the lotus remain uninfluenced by their environment, illustrating the essence of Advaita Vedanta. The Upanishads state, "Brahman is the sole reality," yet we perceive this world as genuine. How so? Shankara utilized the concept of Maya to clarify this unusual phenomenon.

Adi Shankara described the principles of Advaita Vedanta. It states that when an individual attempts to comprehend the formless, ineffable Brahman with their intellect, and while influenced by Maya, what they perceive is Ishvara. Ishvara is the result of the union between Maya and Brahman. In a diagram of his discourse, Adi Shankara states that the Supreme Being (Ishvara) manifests when the representation of the Cosmic Being is viewed through the reflection of Maya. Ishvara represents Saguna Brahman, indicating that Brahman employs Maya as a means. He can be perceived or recognized by individuals who are spiritually enlightened.⁶ Some may even claim that He possesses a personality. People venerate Him. He is the origin of ethics and the individual who provides individuals with the outcomes of their Karma. Nonetheless, He lacks sin or virtuous action. Ishvara's beauty remains unaffected by His bond with Maya. Ishvara consistently understands that the essence of Brahman is singular and that the world is illusory. The Supreme Lord exists solely on the practical level. At the spiritual level, the true essence of the Cosmic Spirit is His genuine form. This raises the question of why the Supreme Lord created the world. Believing that Ishvara creates the world for any reason undermines His wholeness and flawlessness, contradicting the Advaita Vedantic principles as well. For example, believing that Ishvara creates the world to obtain something would oppose His flawlessness. It doesn't seem logical to believe that He creates from kindness, as there was nothing to be compassionate toward initially (when only Ishvara was present). Considering this perspective, Adi Shankara could only conclude that the creation of God is merely a play.

Shankaracharya stated that Brahman, the Ultimate Cosmic Spirit, is the sole reality. All else, including the universe, physical objects, and individuals, is illusory apart from Brahman. The spiritual basis of all existence is Brahman, referred to as the One who is omnipresent, all-powerful, and all-knowing. "Not this, not this" serves as another description of Brahman. It is referred to as Adrishya, signifying "out of the grasp of the physical eyes." It serves as the foundation of the material world, which itself is merely an illusion (Maya).⁷ Nevertheless, Brahman is not defined by the world, as the world is created by Brahman's actions. Many believe that Brahman is the origin of all knowledge in its most authentic state. Brahman cannot be perceived visually or physically. Self-existence, self-joy, self-awareness, and self-happiness are a few of its attributes. What it is is Svarupa (energy) and Nirikara (without form). It is the essence of a person who understands. It is the Observer (Drashta), the Transcendent (Turiya), and the Quiet Witness (Saakshi).

⁵ Radhakrishnan, S. (1914). The Vedanta philosophy and the doctrine of Maya. *The International Journal of Ethics*, 24(4), 431-451.

⁶ Keerthi, G. (2017). The Great Life History Of Shankarachrya. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Advanced Studies*, 4(1), 408-16.

⁷ Mishra, R. K. (2015). Advaita Vedanta Tatwa and Adi Sankaracharya. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 4(2), 40-44.

The main emphasis of Advaita Vedanta is on Brahman. The fundamental concepts of Shankara's Advaita state that the jiva closely resembles Brahman, the world is a deceptive illusion of Brahman, and Brahman is ultimately real. In Advaita philosophy, the universe represents the self-alienation of Brahman, serving as an objectification of the non-objective reality that is perpetually denied. The universe represents both a significant transformation (parinama) of the ignorance within Brahman and an external expression (vivarta) of Brahman. The scripture states that Brahman embodies existence (satya), consciousness (jnana), and infinity (ananta). It is also without birth (ajam), without death (amaram), and infinite (nityam); it is singular without a counterpart (ekamevaditiam); and it cannot be expressed in language. It is also unfamiliar to the intellect (avangmanasagocaram).

The Upanishads describe Brahman as “ekamevaditiam,” meaning “one without a second.” The essence of Saccidananda comprises life, awareness, and joy. Based on Upanishadic teachings like “satyam jnanam anantam Brahman,” Brahman represents knowledge, truth, and boundlessness. It is clear that Brahman embodies the essence of sat, cit, ananda, and ananta. “Ananda Vijnana Brahman” suggests that Brahman represents knowledge and joy, and “anando brahma vyajanat” indicates that He recognizes bliss as Brahman. Two distinct interpretations of Brahman are outlined by the Advaita Vedantins: Tatasthalaksana, meaning accidental, and Svarupalaksana, denoting fundamental. The essence of an object’s definition represents its core. The four essential definitions of Brahman are sat, cit, ananda, and ananta. Shankaracharya elaborates on the ideas of sat, cit, and others in his commentary on the “Taittiriya Upanishad”.

Since Shankaracharya makes no distinction between existence (sat) and reality, “sat” signifies truth. The Upanishads outline two types of Brahman: a supreme form (para) that is devoid of attributes and actions, transformation, and alteration, and an inferior form (apara) that contains all the attributes and actions referred to in certain texts. This is how the Advaitin clarifies the seeming differences and inconsistencies. This lower Brahman represents God, which is a synthesis of the attribute-less essence of Brahman and the indeterminate being referred to as maya or avidya. The mind arises from avidya, whereas the soul is a fusion of the higher Brahman. The world is Brahman’s imaginary embodiment. This indicates that Brahman, the formless reality, seems to be divided into God, the individual soul, and the universe. Maya, also known as avidya, is the power that brings about the previously mentioned evident variations.

Adi Shankara presented several logical explanations for the truth of Brahman, despite Brahman being already factual. Much of what is discussed in the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutras regarding Brahman is quite akin to what Adi Shankara expressed. This serves as evidence of Brahman from others. Every individual possesses a soul, often referred to as Atman. Adi Shankara and his philosophy assert that Atman and Brahman are the same action. This reasoning also demonstrates that the Brahman possesses all knowledge. It appears that everything is proceeding as intended, and nothing is being misplaced. This is not due to an internal power; it originates from Brahman.

Advaitins believe that souls (Atman) can be reborn as plants, animals, or humans, based on their previous behavior. They believe that pain arises from Maya and that only understanding Brahman (referred to as Jnana) can eliminate Maya. When Maya is removed, the Jiva and Brahman are indistinguishable. Jivan mukti refers to the type of happiness that one can feel while still living. You can worship God however you choose while you are at the practical level. However, Adi Shankara believes that rituals, devotion, and puja in the Vedas can assist individuals in attaining Jnana, or genuine knowledge, but they cannot lead them directly to Moksha. One must contend with the consequences of their previous actions. Eventually, a person will have to confront their errors, regardless of the many positive actions they take to conceal them. Likely not in this lifetime.

So the fundamental principle of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy is that, in reality, there is no division among the individual, the universe as a whole, and God, Brahman, nor between consciousness and the universe. According to Advaitins, the cosmos is a manifestation of Brahman, which is gender-neutral. It is a term that directly translates to “expansion,” “advancement,” “increase,” or “the ultimate transcendent and inherent reality, or the singular Godhead.” While Brahman’s attributes (Saguna) are affirmed in various passages of the Upanishads and Bhagavad-Gita, there is no indication that this represents a provisional reality concerning Brahman. “Let me be numerous, let me expand,” proclaims Brahman. Conversely, Shankara claims that Brahman is Nirguna by referencing verses from the Shastra.

Shankara describes Brahman as “that which permeates everything, which is beyond anything, and which, akin to the limitless space surrounding us, completely fills everything from both inside and outside, that ultimate non-dual Brahman—‘that thou art.’” Brahman, the singular essence, represents a state of existence; it is neither a ‘He’ as a personal entity nor an ‘It’ as an impersonal concept. The condition where all distinctions between subject and object are the one who is eliminated is referred to as Brahman. Ultimately, the experience of eternal completeness of existence is referred to as Brahman.

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