

# Class Sixteen - Śaṅkara's Vedānta

Appearance and Reality - Ryan Simonelli

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## 1 Śaṅkara and the *Upadeśasāhasrī*

- **Śaṅkara:** Among the most important philosophers in the Indian philosophical tradition.
  - Born in south India, sometime around 700CE.
  - There were several different schools of Indian philosophy at the time, including various other Hindu schools as well as Buddhist schools.
    - \* Śaṅkara was known as an extremely skilled debater, defending a philosophy of *Advaita Vedānta*.
- **The Basic Aim of Hindu (and Buddhist) Philosophy:** Free oneself from *samsāra*, cyclic existence. This freedom from cyclic existence is known as *moksha* in the Vedic tradition, closely related to the notion of *nirvāṇa* in Buddhism.
  - Samsāra can signify the literal cycle of death and rebirth, governed by karma.
  - But it can also signify the day-to-day rat race, as it were.
- **Advaita Vedānta:** The school systematized by Śaṅkara. Two Parts:
  - **Vedānta:** Literally means the “end of the Vedas.”
    - \* Śaṅkara took it that the way to achieve moksha is articulated in the scriptures known as the *Vedas*, a body of Sanskrit texts that form the scriptural basis of Hinduism
    - \* The latest of these texts are the *Upanishads*, which form the basis of much of Vedānta philosophy.
      - Many philosophical traditions in India around that time were scriptural traditions, in that the aim of the philosopher is to systematically articulate the wisdom that is contained in some older text regarded as authoritative.
      - All of Śaṅkara's major works other than the *Upadeśasāhasrī* are commentaries on scriptures.
  - **Advaita:** Means “non-secondness,” or, in more standard English phrase, “non-dualism.”
    - \* **The Fundamental Non-Duality:** That of Brahman and Ātman.
  - **Brahman:** The supreme principle of reality underlying everything.
    - \* From the *Upaniṣads*: “that from which these beings are born; on which, once born, they live, and into which they pass upon death—seek to perceive that! That is *brahman!*,” (TU, 3.1).
    - \* From *Upadeśasāhasrī*: That “which is the nature of Seeing, like the sky, ever-shining, unborn, one alone, imperishable, stainless, all-pervading, and non-dual,” (I 10, 1).
      - Not to be confused with Brahma, one of the three principal deities in Hinduism (along with Vishnu and Shiva).
      - Also not to be confused with Brahmin, the priestly caste.
  - **Ātman:** One's *true* self, as contrasted with one's *apparent* self.
    - \* Our apparent selves: It certainly appears that there is that we are distinctive people with different achievements, aspirations, and so on which constitute our distinctive identities. This notion of “identity” of “self,” according to Śaṅkara, is illusory.

- \* Our true self: identical to Brahman.
- **Thou Art That:** The fundamental fact whose realization leads to moksha is the identity of Ātman and Brahman.

## 2 Second Prose Chapter of the *Upadeśasāhasrī*

- **The Structure of *Upadeśasāhasrī*:** Two parts of the text:
  - **Prose Part:** Consisting in a rigorous philosophical articulation and defense of the position of Advaita Vedanta.
  - **Metrical Part:** Consists in a more direct articulation of the basic conception.
- **Prose Part Chapter Two:** A dialogue between a student, who wishes to be free of transmigratory existence (*samsara*), and a teacher, who explains the view and responds to the student's objections.
- **Opening Question:** Is the experience of pain and suffering a part of our intrinsic nature or due to extrinsic cause?
 

“If it be of my own nature, I can have no hope of liberation as one one’s nature cannot be got rid of. But if it be causal, liberation from it may be possible by removing the cause,” (§45).
- **Answer:** “It’s *not* your nature but *causal*.”
  - **The Cause:** The cause if ignorance of one’s true nature. Knowledge of one’s true nature will remove the ignorance that is the cause of suffering.
- **Ignorance as Superimposition:** The ignorance in question is a super-imposition of what is *not* the Self on what *is* the Self. It is a mistaking of the self for something it is not.
 

“Fairness and blackness, the properties of the body, are superimposed on the self, which is the object of the consciousness ‘I,’ and the same self is superimposed as

  - The basic point here is meant to apply not just to physical properties like skin tone, but *any* property associated with our “conventional identity” (e.g. being a student, going to University of Chicago, being from a certain country, etc.).
    - \* **Point of Comparison:** The idea of “superimposition” here is similar to the idea of the “imputed” nature that we considered in discussing Yogācāra, whereby dependent reality is taken to have the character of separate intrinsic existents.
- **An Objection:** Superimposition seems to involve non-existence. For instance, in the case of a rope on which the notion of a snake is conceptually superimposed, this superimposition that there really is no snake. Isn’t this problematic?
  - **The proposed alternative:** Isn’t it better to think of the self and the body as inter-twined like the bamboo columns and pillars in a house?
  - **Response:** No, in that case the Self would depend on the body.
    - \* The true Self is “devoid of contact with the body,” and, as such “is eternal and characteristically different from it.”
- **Different from Pleasure and Pain:** The student acknowledges that he, qua conscious knower, cannot be identical to any of the changing states of consciousness in virtue of the fact that he is conscious of them:
 

“I know [pain and pleasure] to be objects of my knowledge like jars and other things. If I were not different, I could not know them. But I know them; so I am different,” (§70, p. 45).
- **The Self as Independent, Pure, and Changeless:** Insofar as the Self is always that which is conscious of the changing states of pleasure, pain, and the like, it is not itself a changing thing:

“[Y]ou, the self, are proved to be free from change and therefore perpetually the same on the ground that all the modifications of the mind without a single exception are known by you. [. . .] If you were changeful like the mind or the

- **The Basic Argument:** The basic argument here seems to go as follows:
  1. The Self is that which is aware of all of the changing mental states of pain, pleasure, and the like.
  2. Insofar as the Self and these states stand to each another as subject to object, the Self cannot be identical with any of them nor with the totality of them. It is, rather, that which knows all of them.
  3. If the Self changed, as these states did, it could not be the knower of all of them.
  4. So, the Self must be the unchanging knower of all of the changing mental states.

- **Comparison to Hume:** Recall Hume’s (lack of) observation:

“For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception,” (1).

Whereas Hume concludes from thought this that there is no self. Śāṅkara concludes that Self is that (which Hume himself expresses by using “I”) which is aware of all things but not identical to any of them.

- **An Objection:** Here, the Self is identified with the knower. However, it’s surely true that we *come to know things*, but such a coming-to-know is surely a change. So the Self cannot possibly be changeless.

- **Reply:** This sense of “knowledge” as change is only a *secondary* sense of “Knowledge.” The *primary* sense of knowledge is not as a change.

- **Recalling Aristotle:** For Aristotle, the primary sense of “knowledge” is that of an *energeia* rather than a *kenesis*.

- **Another Objection:** The teacher maintains that “As Pure Consciousness, the Self is self-existent. No one can prevent Its independence of other things in as much as It never ceases to exist,” (§91). However, the student points out “an exception, namely, I have no consciousness in deep sleep,” (§92).

- **Response:** *Consciousness* persists in deep sleep, even though it is without changing *objects*. Specific objects of consciousness require evidence to be known, but Consciousness, as such, does not.

- **A Regress Argument:** The knower is always *that which knows as subject* rather than *that which is known as object*. If the knower were known as object, there would need to be a knower\*, which is the subject of that knowing, and, if the knower\* were the object of knowing, there would need to be a knower\*\*, and so on (§99).

The Self is not known as object, in the way that the contents of waking life or dreams are known. It is rather “self-effulgent,” that is, known though its own light, not dependent upon any extrinsic knower to be known.

- **Our Nature as Light:** Śāṅkara likens our natures as conscious beings to the light of two different lamps. As such, in our nature is ultimately the same as light (§71).

- **Epistemic Dependence, Ontological Independence:** We become aware of the Self through becoming aware of it as that which is aware of changeless mental modifications. However, that which we are truly aware is the changeless knower of all such modifications:

“[T]hough changeless and eternal, It is noticed in the presence of mental modifications called sense-perception etc. as they are instrumental in making It manifest. It appears to be transitory, as mental modifications called sense-perceptions etc. are so. It is for this reason that it is called the result of proofs in a secondary sense,” (§108).

- **An Explanation of Ignorance:** People mistake the means through which the Self is initially known for the self's true nature, thinking it is transitory, when, in fact, it is changeless.

### 3 Some Comparisons

- **Aristotle:**

- **Aristotle on the Intellect:** "And this reason is separate and unaffected and unmixed, being in its essence actuality. For what acts is always superior to what is affected, as too the first principle is to the matter. [. . .] But it is not the case that sometimes it reasons and sometimes it does not. And having been separated, this alone is just what it is, and this alone is deathless and everlasting, though we do not remember, because this is unaffected, whereas passive reason is perishable. And without this, nothing reasons," (430a10).

- **Plotinus:**

- **Independence of Plotinus and Śaṅkara :** Though there had been cultural exchange between the Hellenistic world and India, there's no evidence that Śaṅkara had any knowledge of Plato or Plotinus. So, there's reason to think that these ideas came about independently. Yet, their philosophies are clearly are very similar.
- **Clear Comparison:** "Plotinus, the celebrated mystic, comes nearest in his views to the Vedanta philosophy, and is practically in full agreement with the Eastern sages, both in his theory and his methodology [. . . Plotinus's philosophy] is nothing short of the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara. Only the view that the world is an overflow of the Perfection of God is peculiar to Plotinus. For, to the Vedanta, there is no such overflow; there is, to it, only the Absolute, and the world is its appearance; not an emanation from or an overflow of its being," (Swami Krishnananda, *Studies in Comparative Philosophy*).