

*Dvaita and Advaita Vedanta: History and Perspectives*

The classic philosophical conflict between the *Advaita* and *Dvaita* schools of thought, which clashed from the 13th century onwards, dominated the landscape of Hindu *Vedanta* thinking for centuries to come. Foremost, it is imperative to outline the fundamentals of these ideologies and of *Vedanta* as a discipline. The historical context from which these philosophies arose will also be explored by considering their founders.

Historically, *Vedanta* was defined as the concluding portions of the *Vedas*, also known as the *Upanisads*. However, *Vedanta* in this academic piece and contemporarily, denotes the opinions of philosophical schools based on the concluding segments of the *Vedas*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Brahmasutra* (Grimes, et al. 2018, 49). The latter two texts stated involve the philosophical branches of ethics and metaphysics, respectively.

Central concepts the reader should understand include *Brahman* and *Atman*. *Brahman* refers to an elusive understanding of the Divine as a formless absolute that is devoid of qualities. Conversely, *Atman* is considered to be the innermost self in all life (Grimes, et al. 2018, 19).

*Advaita* is a Hindu *Vedanta* philosophical school founded around 800 CE, in southern India. Ideologically, they suppose absolute non-dualism between *Brahman* and *Atman*. They affirm that *Brahman* appears as having characteristics, but this deduction merely arises out of ignorance. Interestingly, they consider that the universe itself is unreal (Grimes, et al. 2018, 50). The founder and main proponent of this system is *Sri Adi Shankaracharya* or *Shankara*, who was born around the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE in the southern Indian state of *Kerala*. He was very well known for his defense of Hinduism against Islam and Buddhism (Khilnani 2016, 76-84).

In opposition, *Dvaita* is a *Vedanta* school founded around the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE, in the southern Indian state of *Karnataka*. This ideology holds that an outright difference between individuals/the universe and *Brahman* exists. The only independent reality is *Brahman* and the world along with individuals are all reliant upon the Divine (Grimes, et al. 2018, 50). The founder and principal advocate for this ideology is *Sri Madvacharya* or *Madva*, who was born in *Karnataka*. As well, he is the founder of the *Krishna* temple in *Udupi, Karnataka* (Potter 2005, 5550).

Overall, the writer considers the *Dvaita* school of *Vedanta* more convincing philosophically than the *Advaita* school, in view of the author's understanding of Hinduism as a tradition. The reasons for this comprise *Shankara's* logical fallacies on the compartmentalization of experienced reality, on the capabilities of humans and on the necessity for scriptural understanding. This is in conjunction with the proof by contradiction that *Madva* offers regarding the association between the Divine and individual souls, which corresponds with the author's own experienced reality. This academic paper will begin by considering *Shankara's* commentaries on a multitude of scriptures and discussing the validity of their logic. Subsequently, it will conclude by examining *Madva's Mayavadakhandana* (refutation that the world is illusory (Sarma 2003, 102)) and the *Vishnutattva(vi)nirnaya*, dealing with logic (Sarma 2003, 15).

To begin, a remarkable paradox occurs when paralleling *Shankara's* commentaries on the *Upanisads* and the *Brahmasutra*, explicitly related to spiritual progression and giving qualities to *Brahman*.

*Shankara* states in his commentary on the *Brahmasutra*, "Thus the rest of the book [commentary] is begun to show that the sole *Brahman* is taught in the *Upanisads* to be linked with the adjuncts connected to it or free from the adjuncts connected to it insofar as it is to be

meditated on and insofar as it is to be known” (Hirst 2005, 91). In his commentary on the *Upanisads* he declares, “By appropriating them each [the elements (earth, water, fire, etc.)] in turn, from the most external, and then rejecting them, the seer’s own immediate self, which is within all, is to be shown forth in what follows, having no constituents, free from all characteristics of the transmigratory world” (Hirst 2005, 84).

In the first quote, *Shankara* justifies permitting the ascription of attributes to *Brahman* to either improve meditation or apprehend oneness. Yet, *Shankara* subsequently provides an illustration of an exemplary seer that combats the impulse to compartmentalize his own reality. The purpose of this sage’s restraint is recognizing his ultimate self. *Shankara* provides a prescription in the first quote and a motivating model to follow in the subsequent quote. However, if one follows the path of *Advaita*, they must keenly work against characterization of experienced reality (Grimes, et al. 2018, 50). This necessarily invalidates the allowance from the initial quote.

Interestingly, *Shankara* commits a blunder in his postulation of people’s capabilities, assuming that people are allegedly indifferent from the Divine. In his interpretation of the *Brahmasutra* he says, “If it [*sutras*] were saying that this currently existing manifestation, consisting of bodies and so forth at the individual level and of earth and so forth at the external, is to be annihilated, this teaching on annihilation would have an impossible goal; it is not possible for a single person to cause annihilation” (Hirst 2005, 93).

A logical incongruity occurs here. If people, possibly unbeknownst to them, are actually *Brahman*, they would have boundless capability since they are Divine. Furthermore, based on *Shankara*’s non-dualism, lay people are indistinguishable from *Brahman*. Since *Brahman* refers to the Divine, lay people should be capable of causing annihilation. Infinite entities cannot be

stopped in any way. This is unless *Brahman* is different from the *Atman* or if *Brahman* was not Divine, which would invalidate the semantics of the word *Brahman*.

As a final point, the last contradiction *Shankara* commits is in his commentary on the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* where he claims beings have misconceptions and that the aforementioned text would help them attain knowledge of *Brahman*. Specifically he says, “Thus the round of rebirth from *Brahma* down to stationary objects, which possesses faults such as innate misconception (*avidya*), is based on name, form and action... So this *Upanisad* is begun, to remove misconception from the person who is not attracted (*viraktasya*) [by it], its purpose being the attainment of the knowledge of *Brahman*, which is the opposite of that” (Hirst 2005, 98).

Considering this, there are two issues that arise. *Shankara* first claims that all beings from *Brahma* (the creator God in Hinduism) to non-sentient life have ignorance (*avidya*). With the assumption of absolute non-dualism between *Brahman* and *Atman*, how could an omnipresent Divine be ignorant? This cannot be possible since *Brahman* is Divine. Along the same vein, he later claims that the *Upanisads* are there for the purpose of attaining knowledge of *Brahman*. What need is there for attainment of any scriptural knowledge if one truly understands himself as *Brahman*? If one assumes that *Brahman* and *Atman* are one, then it would be impossible for one’s *Atman* not to realize they are *Brahman*. *Brahman* is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient of itself. There is no ignorance in *Brahman* by its own semantic definition. Questions and contradictions like these baffle the author as to how the statements the great *Sri Shankaracharya* makes can be considered logically coherent.

Keeping in mind *Shankara*'s arguments and assertions, let's explore *Madvacharya*'s angle on why knowledge and scriptures are unnecessary in *Advaita* by examining a portion of the *Mayavadakhandana* translated into English.

*Madva* pronounces, “[If *aikyam*, identity [between *Brahman* and *Atman*]], is not different [from *Brahman* but is its very] nature, then [since *Brahman*] is self-luminous, [*aikyam* would also be self-luminous]. [Therefore *aikyam* would already] possess the means for establishing itself [and would not require *sastra* [scriptures] to be known. Therefore, the *sastras* would be superfluous]” (Sarma 2003, 104).

*Madva* makes certain the conclusion one should grasp is that there is no rationale in scriptural study if one ascribes to absolute non-dualism. One may wonder, what does *Madva* propose as a resolution? What are *Madva*'s judgements on dualism?

*Madhva* lays out his thoughts on establishing difference (*Bhedasadanam*) when he says there is a five-fold difference (*panchabheda*) prevailing in the universe. He says in the *Vishnutattva(vi)nirnaya*, “The universe has five [intrinsic] differences: There is a difference between the *jiva* [individuals] and Lord [Vishnu]. There is a difference between Lord [Vishnu] and *jada*, non-sentient material entities. There is difference between the individual *jivas*. There is a difference between *jivas* and *jadas*, non-sentient material entities. There is difference between one *jada* and another. The [difference between these five] is real” (Sarma 2003, 73-74).

This quote is appealing to the author as it aligns with his own experience of daily perceived reality. The differences that one should appreciate between sentient beings and between those that are sentient and non-sentient shapes the reality of most humans including the authors. It is imperative to draw distinctions. For example, the author discerns that there are

dissimilarities in capability between a human being and a dog or between an elephant and a plant. Assigning these attributes and compartmentalizing reality, in such a way as previously, allows people to prioritize the most important things in their life. An example of this would be helping a financially unstable man instead of donating money to a Fortune 500 CEO. There are discrepancies between the two entities that make their perceived realities different. Accepting these differences is fundamental.

To conclude, the author finds the *Dvaita* school of *Vedanta* to be more philosophically convincing as compared to the *Advaita Vedanta* school. This is due to the logical contradictions of *Shankara* and the author's experienced reality, which aligns with *Madva's* thoughts. The author of this paper would like to make very clear that he holds both *Sri Advacharya* and *Sri Shankaracharya* with great respect and esteem for their noble contributions to Hindu philosophy.

## Bibliography

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