

Knowledge and Reality in the Vedanta School with emphasis on Shankara's Views

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Abstract:

Of all the Vedantic school, that of Shankara has the most importance and allocates the largest amount of literature in the form of commentaries and treaties to itself, so that it would not be inappropriate to call Shankara the most influential Indian philosopher. This article is an attempt to shed some light on knowledge and reality as viewed in Vedantic school of Shankara. Since Shankara is the main exponent of this school, Vedanta philosophy is associated with his name. Owing to his intensely loyalty to tradition and innovative nature of his works, he fascinated and inspired the contemporary Indian thinkers more than other Vedantins. Shankara's Vedanta is based on Advaita (non-dualism) philosophy, according to which ultimate reality is one (unqualified monism), though it appears in many individuals. His non-dualism is traceable to Buddhism, and the latter also is believed to have its origin in the Upanishads. Shankara developed his views about knowledge and reality through his commentaries on the Badarayana's Sutras (aphorism). He rejected all types of dualism and proposed a metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological non-dualism. It is said that he was under the influence of Buddhism, yet he was a severe critic of Buddhism as well.

Keywords: Knowledge, reality, Advaita, Shankara, Upanishads.

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Introduction

Before embarking upon dealing with the main issues of the paper, it is proper to consider certain points, in order to clear the minds from any upcoming misunderstanding. First, the main thrust of this paper is only to shed some light on Shankara's metaphysical and epistemological views in a synoptic manner, rather than delving into the depth of the matter, or carrying out a comparative study of Vedanta philosophers concerning knowledge and reality, or making a critical study of his views from the perspective of the other philosophical views. No doubt, It would have been worthwhile to compare Shankara's views with those of Muslim or Western philosophers particularly with emphasis on their approaches towards the oneness of being, or compare Shankara's Advaita (undetermined non-dualism) with those of his critics such as Ramanuja qualified non-dualism, or Madhva qualitative dualism and quantitative pluralism, but the domain of the paper is restricted and has nothing to do with all those points.

As for the sources of this paper, it relied on Indian authors rather than orientalist's works. Because, so far as the Indian philosophies and religions are concerned, the works of Indian thinkers are more reliable than those of Western writers. For, they were, after all, brought up and trained within that culture, and so it is advisable first to learn Indian philosophies from Indian thinkers and then proceed to see it in others perspectives. Of all the contemporary English sources on Indian philosophy, Radhakrishnan's *Indian Philosophy*, and Dasgupta's *The History of Indian Philosophy* enjoy an important place in this field, so they constitute the main sources of this paper as well. The former has devoted 215 pages and the latter has devoted more than 300 pages of their books to Shankara's philosophy, which means that Shankara's views occupy a considerable portion of these works and enjoy an important place in them. Currently, even Indian scholars consider those works as important and authentic sources, and for the most part refer to them in their works on Indian thought. Moreover, these two thinkers had good command over Sanskrit language and benefited enough from Sanskrit sources in general and Shankara's original works in particular. Frankly speaking, I had no access to Sanskrit texts in general and Shankara's original works in particular, so he confined his sources on the foregoing works plus some other works by Indian and Western writers, and never pretends to give a new version of Shankara's views. From now, we are going to deal with the main topics.

Shankara¹ is one of the prominent exponents of the Vedantic school and his works present us with a remarkable reservoir of rich meditations on

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Indian metaphysics. Therefore, his views deserve a meticulous study. In his *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Dasgupta writes that so great is the influence of the philosophy propounded by Shankara and elaborated by his illustrious followers, that whenever we speak of the Vedanta philosophy, we mean the philosophy that was propounded by Shankara (Dasgupta, 1997, p. 429). So, his views deserve a closer attention not only on account of his philosophical advantages, but also because of his influence on the contemporary Indian thinkers and philosophers such as Rabindranat Tagore (1861-1941)², Vivekananda (1863-1902)³, Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950)⁴, Radhakrishnan (1888-1975)⁵, and even Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948).

Shankara was a genius on every count. During his short span of life which lasted only thirty five years, he succeeded to write certain commentaries on Badarayana's Sutas (Vedanta's Aphorism). He travelled on foot, almost every part of India and debated with many rival schools and convinced them to agree with him. At that time, Buddhism was the prevalent school, so he managed to confront with Budhists and challenge their views. He also showed his genius in organizing by setting up certain monasteries in four regions of India, and appointed a pontiff to each of the monasteries in order to fulfill the spiritual need of people. Moreover, he was also a great ascetic. Owing to these characteristics, he was appreciated by all Indian intellectuals.

There are several commentators on Shankara's works some of whom are Vacaspati (9th century), Sarvajnatman (9th century), Padmapada and Prakasatman (12th century), Sri Harsa (12th century), Citsukha (13th century), Vidyaranya (14th century), Madhusudana (16th century), and Appaya Diksita (16th century). Shankara had severe critics as well. As an example, one of Ramanuja's followers, Vedanta Desika (13th century), wrote a book called *Satadusani* (Hundred Defects) to disprove Shankara's views, to which an answer was given by a follower of Shankara, Anatakrisna Sastry in his book called *Satabhusani* (Hundred Jewels). All these mark the scope and the depth of Shankara's influence on Indian intellectuals.

Shankara Vedanta

The word '*vedanta*' means the end of the Vedas which is equated with the Upanishads. Basically, Vedanta is a philosophy based upon the Upanishads. Owing to the variety of the authors of the Upanishads in different periods of time, it yielded different views, so it became necessary to systematize these views. Badarayana (c. 200 B.C.) is a figure who undertook this task and after studying the Upanishads, expressed his views in the form of five hundred fifty Sutas (aphorism). These Sutas were so vague that required

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explanations and interpretations, through which near about eleven schools of thought came into the existence. The fountain-head of all interpretations was the Upanishads, but the upholders of the schools also considered the *Bhagavadgita* in line with the Upanishads. So, in their interpretation, they referred to this book as well. In short, for all of them, the Upanishads, Sutras, and *Bhagavadgita* were the basic sources in developing their systems. Since the *Bhagavadgita*, which is a part of the epic of the Mahabharata, is regarded as a scripture that is remembered (*Smṛti*), but not as a scripture heard (*Śruti*), so the commentators felt free to use whatever epics suited them in support of their doctrines.

Besides these schools, there were also other religious traditions which had their origins in the Vedas, such as the Pasupata, the Pancaratra, and the Sakta. Some of the Vedantins, except Shankara and Bhaskara belong to one of these traditions. The Pasupatra tradition treats the Vedantic Brahman as Shiva, and the Pancaratra treats the Brahman as Vishnu. For the Sakta tradition the energy aspect of the godhead is important. All these three traditions possess their own Upanishads.

Although the Vedanta is a philosophy based upon the Upanishads, in practice it has come to mean the philosophy developed by commenting on the Sutras of Badarayana, who is considered by all Vedantins as the authentic interpreter of the Upanishads. It is believed that before Badarayana, there also were some interpreters of the Upanishads such as Asmarathya, Audulomi, and Kasakrstna, but their works are not available.

The earliest commentary on Badarayana is that of Shankara. At his time, the ideas of the Mahayana Buddhism and of the Sankhya-Yoga got mixed up with the Upanishads and contributed to the development of the Vedanta philosophy. For instance, the Buddhist concept of Maya was utilized by the Vedanta school through identifying it with Prakṛti of the Upanishads. But it should be pointed out that none of the Vedantins accepted Buddhism and Sankhya-Yoga as such.

In reading the Upanishads, the *Bhagavadgita*, and Sutras, the Vedantins appeared to be not unanimous with each other in certain issues; as a result, different trends appeared within this school. As an example, we can refer to the following controversial issues, which underlie the advent of different schools within the Vedantins:

1. In the Upanishads, it is written that the Brahman is everything, including the individual spirits and the material world. But in some other passages of the Upanishads, it is asserted that the Brahman is none of them and is different from all. Here we can infer both unqualified monism or non-dualism (*Advaita*) as advocated by Shankara, and unqualified pluralism as represented by Madhva. Some commentators tried to reconcile these two

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approaches. According to the Vedantins, There are three kinds of reality: first, the Supreme Spirit, second, the individual spirits, and third, the material spirit. Furthermore, there are also three kinds of relationship: first, the relation of the Supreme Spirit to the individual spirits, second, the relations of the individual spirits to matter, and third, the relation of matter to the Supreme Spirit. Each of the three terms is related to the other two, and so each relation has two directions. Here a number of questions arise: Are all the relations of the same kind? Are they of the same kind in each of the directions? If the three relations are of different kinds, what is the nature of the directions? If each relation is different in its directions, what is the nature of this difference? The Vedantic philosophers are not unanimous in their answers to these questions.

2. There are some other problems in the Upanishads concerning the nature of creation, which led to a split among the Vedantins. In this regard, Radhakrishna says:

Some considered creation as the manifestation of God, while others regard it as the nature of dream or illusion; others maintain that it is the will of God; while those who believe in time declare that everything proceeds from time. Some say that creation is for the sake of enjoyment. Gaudapada rejects all these views and declares that "it is the inherent nature of the shining one. What desire can he have who has attained all?" (Radhakrishna, 1983, p. 460).

So, he rejects the view that the world is comparable to a dream, or an illusion, and contents that it is the manifestation of the very nature of God. Shankara is of the view that the world is neither a real creation by Brahman, nor a real modification of Brahman. Brahman associated with its power, and Maya is the ground on which the phenomenal world is superimposed (Sharma, 1983, p. 261).

3. According to some Sutras, Brahman is realized as one's own *atman*. This assertion is accepted by all Vedantins, but was interpreted differently. Brahman is not the object of man's sense perception. Since it cannot be experienced outside man; it has to be experienced by personal experience and within man. The gate leading to the realization of the Brahman is the very self, which refers to itself as "I". As Brahman is never an object, it has to be understood as an "I" within man, or as the witness of man's "I".

The above statements, too, were interpreted differently. According to Shankara, Sutras should be interpreted literally. The Brahman is man's spirit itself (*atman*). There is an absolute and transcendental identity between man's *atman* and Brahman. Unlike Shankara, Madhva did not believe in literal meaning of the Sutras. He is of the view that there is only similarity between man's "I" and Brahman's "I". But they are absolutely two different

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things. The other Vedantins also hold different views in this regard.

Advaita Vedanta

Advaita literally means not two-ness or non-duality. This philosophical notion constitutes the fundamental principle of the Vedanta school of Shankara, according to which the only reality is the Brahman; that the duality set up between self and the world, between spirit and matter, is the result of illusion (*maya*), or of ignorance (*avidya*).

It is important to note the negative form of this philosophical term. It would have been easy to find a positive term if it has been tried to assert dogmatically the oneness of all reality as a positive conclusion. The Advaita does not positively assert this oneness; it simply denies the dualism which presents itself in our ordinary thinking. This distinction is not only of importance in defining the precise meaning of the Advaita, but it also shed light on the process of development by which Indian philosophy arrived at this result. Just as the ancient philosophy of Greece was preceded by attempts to reach the basis of things along quite other lines, the Advaita solution for the Indian problem was the culmination of a long series of philosophic systems, such as the six *darshanas*. (Hastings, 1980, p. 137).

In his *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Dasgupta states:

The main idea of the Advaita (non-duality) in Vedanta philosophy as taught by the Shankara School is this: the ultimate and absolute truth is the self, which is one, though appearing as many in different individuals. The world also as apart from us the individuals has no reality and has no other truth to be shown than this self. All other events, mental or physical, are passing appearances, while the only absolute and unchangeable truth underlying them all is the self. ... Vedanta sought to reach beneath the surface of appearance, and enquire after the final and ultimate truth underlying the microcosm and the macrocosm, the subject and the object". (Dasgupta, 1997, p. 439).

In the Vedanta School, there are two extreme positions, which are called non-dualism (*advaita*) and dualism (*dvaita*). The former is held by Shankara, and the latter is advocated by Madhva. Non-dualism means that there is no duality between the Supreme Spirit and individual spirits, and between these two on the one side, and the world of matter on the other. Dualism does not mean that there are only two qualitatively or quantitatively different realities, but that the Supreme Spirit, the individual spirits, and the third kind are pluralistic. What Madhva has in mind, when he teaches dualism, is the duality of the Supreme Spirit and the individual spirits; the former is not at all same as the latter. On this point, Madhva is uncompromising and is,

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therefore, called a dualist. Otherwise, he is a real pluralist and proposes a number of intermediary views. Shankara attempts to explain certain passages in the Upanishads, teaching the difference between the Supreme Spirit on the one side, and the individual spirits and matter on the other, by taking the plurality as a manifestation of the underlying unity. Madhva thinks that Shankara explains away plurality, while he explains away the passages teaching the reality of the underlying unity. Some other Vedantins, taking both passages seriously, and introduce different kinds of relationship that can preserve both unity and plurality. Thus different Vedanta schools came into existence. But, the primary interest of all lies in the relationship between the Supreme Spirit and the finite spirits. The interest in the principle of matter was secondary and subsidiary.

Radhakrishnan is of the view that the central principles of Advaita philosophy, such as the orders of reality, the identity of Brahman and Atman, *maya* (illusion), the inapplicability of causation to ultimate reality, *Jnan* or wisdom, as the direct means to *moksha* or freedom, and the inconceivability of absolute nothing, are set forth in the *Karika*. (Radhakrishna, 1983, p. 452).

Gaudapada⁶ (sixth century) is the first systematic exponent of the Advaita Vedanta. He is reputed to be the teacher of the Shankara's teacher, Govinda, and is said to have lived about the beginning of the eighth century or the end of the seventh. But Shankara expanded the Advaita (non-duality) as was prevalent in his time and it means he was touched with the current trends of that time such as Buddhism.

P. T. Raju is of the view that a few centuries before Shankara, certain Buddhist schools such as the Vijnannvada and the Madhyamika began calling their ultimate reality non-dual (*advaya*). The Prajnaparamita literature, which is perhaps earlier than the birth of Christ, repeatedly uses the word no-dual (Raju, 1985, p. 382). So, Shankara's concept of reality as non-dual is traceable to Buddhist schools of thought and it has nothing to do with Western concept of oneness of being as advocated, for instance by Parmenides, Plato or Plotinus. Even it is said that the mystic idealism of Plotinus owe much of its content to Indian thought. We know that Plotinus accompanied the Emperor Gordian in his campaign to the east, and he may have then come into contact with the representatives of Indian thought (Radhakrishnan., 1983, p. 521).

There is no doubt that the Vedanta philosopher, Gaudapada was under the influence of Buddhism, but Shankara was not in agreement with him and criticized Buddhism severely. C. D. Sharma maintains that Shankara too was considerably influenced by Buddhism. He preserved the best that has been suggested in Mahayana in his philosophy. He used many words,

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especially in his Upanishad-Bhasyas, which were commonly used in Mahayana literature. But outwardly, he was an enemy of Buddhism (Sharma, C., 1983, p. 253). Gaudapada frankly approves of the no-origination theory of Shunyavada school of thought, while Shankara took the word *shunya* in its popular sense of negation, and so dubbed Shunyavada as a self-condemned nihilism, and was of the view that there is no right to condemn this world as unreal unless it takes recourse to some higher reality. Indeed, Shunyavada does take recourse to this higher reality unknowingly. For instance, Nagarjuna, the well known exponent of Shunyavada, uses the very word *tattva* and defines it as what is to be directly realized, what is calm and blissful, where all plurality is merged, where all cries of intellect are satisfied, and which is the non-dual Absolute. (ibid., p. 321).

Moreover, It is believed that the very Buddhism was indebted to the Upanishads in considering this world as unreal, and contending that intellect, being essentially relational, involves itself in insoluble antinomies, and in order to be one with reality, has to get itself transformed into immediate spiritual experience, that is, *Bodhi* (pure consciousness). Even Ashvaghosha, the Buddhist philosopher and poet, frankly confessed this fact by saying that Buddha's real philosophy was based on the Upanishads, and indeed, he tried to revive it. *Bodhi* or *Prajna* is in fact the same as the Atman or the Brahman of the Upanishads. Ashvaghosha's concept of *Bodhi* or pure consciousness together with its two aspects of the absolute suchness and the conditional suchness reminds us the Atman or the Brahman of the Upanishads with its two aspects of the higher and the lower or the *nirguna* or the *para* and the *saguna* or the *apara*. The *Bodhi* and the Brahman, both are pure consciousness and indescribable in the sense that intellect fails to grasp them fully.

Even, there are some similarities between Buddhist philosophical school of Shunyavadha and Vedanta school which suggest the influence of the Upanishads on Buddhism. According to Shunyavadha, all world experiences including subjective and objective are devoid of ultimate reality. They are merely relative. They are ultimately unreal, because they can be called neither existent, nor non-existent, nor both. They are indescribable or *Maya*. But the mere fact that they are appearances implies that there must be a reality of which they are mere appearances. This reality is beyond all pluralities. It is like Brahman. It is *Bodhi* or pure consciousness. It is indescribable, because all categories of the intellect fail to grasp it fully. All these notions are found in the Upanishads.

So, It is believed that Buddhism and Vedanta school are not two opposed systems, but only different stages in the development of the same central thought, which started with the Upanishads and found its indirect support

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in Buddha, and its elaboration in Mahayana Buddhism, its open revival in Gaudapada, and finally its culmination in Shankara.

Shankara on Reality

In his philosophical endeavors, Shankara sought to prove that reality is one and Brahman is the highest transcendental reality and disapproves duality. According to the author of *Structural Depths of Indian Thought*, Shankara accepts the reality of Brahman on the basis of the Upanishads. But in his controversies with the schools that do not accept the Vedic authority (for instance Buddhism), he developed independent argument. The Brahman is described in different ways by the Upanishads, and the descriptions boil down ultimately into three constitutive characteristics: Being (*satta*), Consciousness (*cit*), and Bliss (*ananda*). The first two are relevant to epistemology and metaphysics, and the third to aesthetics and the life of salvation. Shankara would show, so far as metaphysics is concerned, the ultimate truth of the Brahman in terms of being and consciousness. (Raju, P. T., 1985, p.393). Brahman is being, because it is not non-being. Brahman is consciousness, because it is not unconsciousness, and it is bliss, because it is not of the nature of pain. It is identical, because it is beyond time. It is unchanging, since it is beyond space.

Brahman in Shankara is the only truth. It is beginningless and unchanging. It is the essence of all things, it is unconditioned and self-illuminated. It is being as well as consciousness. Whatever is conscious, it also exists. By the knowledge of Brahman the knowledge of the world, which is really ignorance will disappear, for the knowledge of Brahman is the basis of the knowledge of the world.

Brahman in Shankara's view is a cause in a special sense. That is, the world is the reflection or the manifestation of Brahman. It is due to ignorance that Brahman is seen as the world of many names and forms. Ramanuja (d.c.1137), the renowned Vedanta philosopher, maintains that Brahman has personality. He is the ultimate person. But Shankara admits Brahman as beyond all distinctions and personalities. He is neither knower nor doer, but pure knowledge. Indeed, knowledge here is not an activity, but Brahmanhood. Since in activity there is imperfection, change, or motion, while Brahman is beyond all these attributes. Radhakrishnan states that in Shankara's view, we may speak about Brahman, but we cannot describe it adequately, or have any logical knowledge of it. If finite man can comprehend Brahman, then either our understanding must be infinite or Brahman must be finite. Every word employed to denote a thing denote that thing as associated with a certain genus, or act, or quality, or mode of

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relation. Brahman has no genus, possesses no qualities, does not act, and is related to nothing else. (Radhakrishna, 1983, p. 535)

The Upanishads have described Brahman both as Saguna (with qualities) and Nirguna (without qualities). The former has been called as the Apara (lower) Brahman, while the latter has been called Para (higher) Brahman. The Para Brahman is unconditioned, without particularities and without qualities. The Apara Brahman is conditional. Ramanuja⁷ has accepted both Saguna and Nirguna to be the ultimate Brahman. While Shankara believes that it is of ignorance to admit two forms of Brahman since in reality only the Nirguna is true. Due to ignorance it appears as Saguna.

Shankara believes that there is no distinction between the Atman and Brahman. Both have the same characteristics of being and consciousness, all-pervadingness and bliss. Indeed, Atman is Brahman. The purely subjective is also the purely objective. The Atman is nothing but consciousness. According to Radhakrishnan, Atman cannot be intelligence (consciousness) without existence. It is also of the nature of bliss (*ananda*). *Ananda* is freedom from all suffering. Shankara denies activity to Atman, since activity by its nature is non-eternal. The self cannot be the abode of any action, since an action cannot exist without modifying that in which it abides. All activity presupposes the self-ness, and, so far as we are aware, it is of the form of pain and motivated by desire. Activity and enjoyment are dependent on a dualistic vision, which is not the highest truth. He regards the Atman as one, universal, and infinite, for the same reason for which Hegel calls his idea infinite. (ibid, p. 483).

Unlike Descartes, Shankara never tried to abstract the self from the not-self in order to prove the reality of the self. As a matter of fact, Shankara's self is not the individual knowing subject, for it would lead to the plurality of countless selves. Shankara's Atman is neither the individual self nor a collection of such selves. Shankara says that "it is not a thing in the empirical sense which we may indicate by words; nor is it an object like a cow which can be known by the ordinary means of acquiring knowledge. It cannot be even be described by its generic properties or specific marks; we cannot say that it acts in this manner, since it is always known to be actionless. ... It cannot, therefore, be positively described." (p. 484). There is also difference between Shankara's notion of the self with those of Kant and Fichte's absolute ego, and it is out of place to discuss them here.

At any rate, Brahman and Atman in Shankara's philosophy are considered to be two sides of the same coin. Both are beyond the senses, the mind, and the intellect. They can be realized only by immediate knowledge. Whatever is in the self is also in the non-self. By this synthesis of the Brahman and Atman, Shankara rejected all types of dualism and established a

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metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological non-dualism. Brahman is present everywhere in the form of the soul. That is, whatever is in the macrocosm is also in the microcosm.

All three characteristics of Brahman namely, being, consciousness, and bliss are one and the same. This metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological synthesis of Brahman in Shankara's philosophy is unrivalled in the history of philosophy. There is no distinction between knower, knowledge, and known in Brahman, nor any distinction between waking, dreaming, and sleeping; consciousness and unconsciousness and sub-consciousness etc. In spite of considering Brahman as beyond all distinctions, Shankara has not taken it to be a negation. Brahman can be realized by immediate intuitive knowledge. Brahman is of the nature of bliss. But this bliss is merely an object of experience. Hence by calling Him bliss, Brahman does not become attributed.

Shankara on Knowledge

There is a controversy among Indian philosophers concerning the role of knowledge and action (*karma*) in the realization of the Absolute and attaining salvation. Shankara under influence of the Upanishads repeatedly asserts that the Absolute can be realized through knowledge and action is subsidiary. He says, action may help us in the realization of the Absolute by purifying our mind, but it is knowledge alone that by destroying ignorance can enable us to be one with the Absolute. By removing ignorance, the Reality will shine forth by itself. Action is prescribed for one who is still in ignorance, and not for one who is enlightened. A liberated sage performs action without any attachment and expectation.

Knowledge of Ultimate reality leads to eternal bliss, and such knowledge culminates in immediate experience or immediate spiritual realization. True knowledge can neither be produced by hundreds of injunctions nor by hundreds of prohibitions. Knowledge is not a mental activity, because it depends not on mind but on the existent fact. It leads to liberation by removal of ignorance. A blessed man who has realized the Reality is liberated.

There are three sources of knowledge including *Shruti* (revelation or scriptural testimony), reason and intuition, each one of which seeks to be crowned as the main criterion of knowledge. Shankara attaches great importance to the revealed sources of the Vedas and regards them as the breath of God (Sharma, 1983, p. 287). It should be pointed out that he never accepted scriptural testimony blindly. He is of the view that the *Shruti* is the result of highest realization of the ancient sages which is the most

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valuable pearl that the ocean of human experience can ever boast to yield after having been churned by the rod of the intellect (ibid, p. 388). Indeed, Shankara built his great philosophical system of Advaita on the foundation of such epistemological view (p. 289).

Shankara repeatedly asserts that discursive intellect cannot grasp the Reality. Brahman cannot become the object of perception as it has no form, and it does not lend itself to inference and other means, as it has no characteristic mark. He says that *Shruti* cannot be set aside by mere logical quibbling. There is a similarity between Shankara's approach towards reason with that of Kant. Like Kant, Shankara arrived at the conclusion that it is impossible for man to have knowledge of transcendent objects.

So far as the phenomenal world is concerned, Shankara never question the validity of the intellect. He never asks us to accept the *Shruti* blindly. He is never satisfied with a mere quotation from the scripture on a vital issue but always defend the intellect. He says that if we find contradiction in the *Shruti*, we should interpret other passages of the *Shruti* in the light of that central doctrine of the *Shruti* which appeals to reason. If the *Shruti* contradicts reason, reason must be our guide for it is nearer to our experience. Even if hundred *Shru* declare with one voice that fire is cool and without light or that the sun does not shine, we cannot accept them. Reason is the sole means of knowing truth and falsity. We cannot question the validity of the intellect in the phenomenal world (ibid., p. 289). In some of his commentaries, Shankara favors *Shruti*, while in other places supports the intellect and reasoning. According to Ranade and Prakashananda, Shankara has given a higher place to *Shruti* and Scripture, but according to Mukerjee, he maintained reasoning to be higher than scripture.

Let us explain Shankara's views concerning the three sources of knowledge as: 1-Perception, 2-Inference, and 3- Scriptural testimony which have been asserted by him as the main sources of knowledge (ibid, p.488).

1. Perception- Perception is the direct consciousness of objects obtained generally through the exercise of the senses. According to Radhakrishnan, Shankara did not discuss the psychology of perception, so we are not able to state his views exactly. The theory of perception adopted generally by the Advaita Vedanta is rather crude on the scientific side, though its metaphysical insight is valuable. The whole question of the internal organ and its modifications which take the form of the object is dealt with in a dogmatic way. The merit of this theory of perception is its open admission of the impossibility of reducing consciousness to a mere material change. When the Advaita says that the immediately perceived object has no existence distinct from that of the knower, it only means that the substratum which maintains the object is not different from that of the

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subject (Radhakrishnan, 1983, p. 492).

Perception in Shankara's philosophy refers to the identity of subject and object in consciousness. The subject and the object remain separate because of the covering of ignorance. But by the direct union of the inner instruments through the sense it takes the form of the object and shines in the form of that particular object illumined by the self due to the removal of the covering of ignorance. This definition of perception, according to Vedanta, in spite of being too imperfect, clarifies the fact that it is the same consciousness that exists in the subject and in the object which appears to be separate due to ignorance.

2. Inference- According to the Advaita philosophy, the knowledge which results by the past impression based on the awareness of concomitance is inference. The awareness of concomitance leaves the impression on the unconscious and when these impressions are awakened by perceiving that object again, the result is inference. For example, after being aware of the relation of concomitance between the fire and the smoke, one can infer about the existence of fire. According to Vedanta school, only one example is sufficient to establish a major premise and it does not need many instances. If one finds the appearance of silver in nacre, one can infer that all things besides Brahman are mere appearance. Against the Nyaya School, Shankara admits only three premises of an inference as follows:

A) Everything different from Brahman is unreal.

B) Since all things are different from Brahman.

C) So all things are unreal as seeing of the silver in nacre. (Vatsyana, 1983, p. 201).

According to some Vedantins, if there is a kind of conflict between perception and inference, we should accept inference. Similarly, if there is a kind of conflict between inference and scriptural testimony, we should accept the latter. (Raju, 1983, p.385).

3. Scriptural Testimony (*Shruti*)- Vedanta philosophy considered Vedas as independent testimony and authentic source of knowledge, and believed that they contain the timeless rules of all created existence. It is held that while the significance of the Vedas is eternal, the texts themselves are not so, since they are re-uttered by gods in each world-age. The Vedas are said to embody the ideal form of the universe, and since the latter is constant, the Vedas are said to be eternal. Since the successive worlds have their constant forms, the authoritativeness of the Vedas is not impaired at any successive world-epoch. The archetypal forms are not eternal in the sense in which the ultimate reality is eternal, since they are all the product of the veil of ignorance. The origination of the world from the word does not mean that the word constitutes the material cause of the world as Brahman does.

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In this regard, Shankara says: "While there exist the everlasting words, whose essence is the power of denotation in connection with their eternal significations (i.e. the forms denoted), the creation of such individual things as are capable of having those words applied to them is called the origination from those words" (Radhakrishnan, 1983, p. 496).

Although Shankara accepted the three aforementioned sources of knowledge, his followers accepted all the six sources accepted by the Mimamsa⁸. It is said that Advaita generally accepted the six sources of knowledge. Though some of the Advaita dialecticians like Shri Harsha do not accept any of the six, but only the indeterminate intuition of the Brahman, which is Being itself. They hold that all six means of knowledge are self-contradictory. If dialectical reason shows that the world of the manifest is self-contradictory, we have to accept its ultimate falsity and the truth of the Brahman.

Conclusion

Shankara developed a particular metaphysical and epistemological view, and taught a method for realizing the Reality. It goes without saying that in dealing with these issues he was under the influence of Buddhism; particularly in his concept of Advaita, Maya, and even in his skepticism about the preconceptions of common sense and the first principles of thought, Shankara was indebted to Buddhism. At the same time, he was a severe critic of Buddhism. He used bitter words against this school of thought, and during his trip to different regions of India, tried to challenge Buddhist idealistic views. Practically, all of the Vedantins including Shankara were epistemologically realists and were opposed to the epistemological idealism of Buddhism, particularly Vijñānavāda Buddhism. In his approach towards the concept of Maya, Shankara never asserts that the world does not exist. Furthermore, from the religious point of view, Shankara was of the view that the Absolute can be realized through knowledge and action is subsidiary, and like Socratic "know thy self" his motto was self-realization. Yet, to know the Absolute is possible only through self-realization. This knowledge is not possible through the sense perception or intellect, but through immediate knowledge.

Notes

1- It is said that Shankara was born between 700 and 800 A. D. in the Malabar country in the Deccan. His father Shivaguru was a Yajurvedi

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Brahman of the Taittiriya branch. He turned ascetic in his eighth year and became the disciple of Govinda, a renowned sage who resided in a mountain cell on the banks of the Narbuda. He then came over to Benares and thence went to Badarikashrama. It is said that he wrote his illustrious bhasya on the *Brahma-sutra* in his twelfth year. Later on, he also wrote his commentaries on ten Upanishades. He returned to Benares, and from this time forth he decided to travel all over India in order to defeat the adherents of other schools of thought in open debate. It is said that he died at the age of thirty five. (extracted from Dasgupta's *A History of Indian Philosophy*)

2- Tagore was a popular poet, novelist, musician, painter, and playwright who reshaped Bengali literature and musician in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He is also the first Asian who won Noble prize in literature.

3- Vivikananda is considered to be a key figure in the introduction of Hindu philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga in Europe and America.

4- Aurobindo was an Indian nationalist, freedom fighter, poet, and philosopher and Yogi.

5- Radhakrishnan was a philosopher and statesman. He was also the first Vice- President of India (1957-1962) and the second President of India (1962-1967).

6- Gaudapada is the teacher of Govinda, Shankara's teacher. He is said to have written a commentary on the *Samkhyakarikas*, but is most revered as the author of the *Mandukyakarikas*, a short text comprising 215 verses outlining the philosophy of non-dualism.

7- Rmannuja was the leading theologian of the qualified non-dualistic Vedanta school. He was born in the year 1027 A.D. He was a Tamil Brahman and received his early training in the Brahmasutra of Badarayana from Yadavprakasa .

8-One of the six Indian philosophical system developed around second century B. C.

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