



A
PROJECT REPORT ON
SANKAR'S VEDANTA PHILOSOPHY
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DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

PATTAMUNDAI COLLEGE

PATTAMUNDAI

REPORT

A Project work on Sankara's philosophy was under taken by the +3 -3rd year (Hons) student of philosophy department under my guidance. It is found from the study that the Sankara's Vedanta philosophy is a unique philosophy. Because the total Vedanta philosophy can be summarized in one line according to Sankara, that is the Brahman is true, the world is false and there is no difference in between Brahman and Jiva.

The term Vedanta means – “the end of the Veda”. The concluding parts of the vedas are Upanisads. Hence the Upanisads are collectively called as Vedanta. Since Vedanta deals with the later portions of the vedas, it is also called as Uttara-Mimansa.

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SANKAR'S VEDANTA PHILOSOPHY

Vedanta is the most important and widely recognized school of Indian Philosophy. It is an orthodox school directly based on the Vedas. Badarayana is believed to be the founder of the Vedanta School, while Gaudapada is its first systematic expounder.

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The Vedanta school is highly philosophical. It has drawn the attention of even the thinkers of the west. It expounds the relationship between jagat (matter), atman (soul) and Brahman (God). Also it attempts to unfurl the true nature of reality of the world, souls and God. Based on the question of reality of the world, souls and God and their relationship with one another. Vedanta school of thought has been divided into many sub-schools.

Some of them are:-

- (i) Advaita Vedanta of Sankaracharya
- (ii) Visistadvaita Vedanta of Ramanuja
- (iii) Suddhadvaita of Vallabhacharya
- (iv) Dvaitadvaita of Nimbarkacharya

The schools of Vedanta deduce their principles or doctrines from three texts, namely, the Upanisads, the Brahmasutras and the Bhagavad Gita. These texts are collectively called as Prasthanas. Prasthanas are not

only expounds the philosophical glory of the ancient past of the Indian culture, but also carries a strong message for all ages and cultures.

Sankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta:-

The brand of Vedanta expounded by Sankaracharya is Advaita Vedanta. Advaita means non dualism or monism. The principles of Advaita Vedanta have their origin in the Upanisads, the Brahmasutra and the Bhagvat Gita. Hence much of Advaita Vedanta carries similarity with them.

Sankara developed his ideas of Advaita Vedanta through his commentaries on various ancient texts. His important works include Brahmasutrabhasya- the commentary on the Brahmasutras, Gitabhasya- the commentary on Bhagvat Gita and the commentaries on the Upanisads.

The central theme of Advaita Vedanta can be expressed by the following ideas.

- (a) Reality is Brahman.
- (b) The world is unreal.
- (c) The soul is non-different from Brahman.

Sankara is a monist. He believes in one and only reality, namely, Brahman. There is no other reality apart from Brahman. Even the souls are not independently real. They are real only in terms of the Brahman. The individual souls are just the drops of water of the vast immeasurable ocean (Brahman), ignorance of the true nature of reality binds the individual souls with their respective bodies and makes one to identify his soul with the body. But with the dawn of knowledge, he realizes that his soul is distinct and different from the body, senses, mind etc. and experiences an undifferentiated unity with Brahman. In other words, the drop of water (soul) becomes the ocean (Brahman).

Having said that Brahman is the sole reality, it is worth to note here that the world is unreal. Though the world we all live in looks real. Yet it is actually

Unreal. The world has only empirical reality and from a transcendental point of view, it is unreal.

Sankara's view of the World: Everybody experiences the world and its objects. The experience reveals the phenomenal character of the world. Whatever is subject to experience is liable for destruction. Since the objects of the world are experienced, they are liable for destruction, sooner or later. The soul or self or atman perceives the objects, but does not perceive itself. The objects perceived are unreal and the atman which is not perceived is real. The real is free from all self-contradictions, but the world being unreal. It is full of contradictions. Even space, time and causation which are the forms of all experience are not ultimate. If we transcend them, the diversities that we see in the world would collapse into a unity. All that we experience in the world are phenomenal and unreal. The phenomenal experiences are not static, but are ever changing and hence fail to be real. Real is that which never changes, it remains present in all moments and times. One who has an insight into reality sees no phenomenal world since world is unreal and false. The unreal phenomenal world is sublated on attaining true knowledge. Those who take the world as real are in the veil of ignorance and they need to come out of it to realize the true nature of reality. The true realization of reality simply condemns the world as unreal and projects something eternal and transcendent as real. The worldly objects have a beginning and end and are also subject to ordinary human experience, and hence are not eternal and transcendent. Only the real has no beginning and end in time. It has existence in all moments and times. It was existent in the past, existence in the present and will continue to exist in all times in the future. In the words of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, "If anything is real in Samsara, it cannot cease to be real in moksha. In the sense, the changing world is not real," The objects of the world come into being and end up sooner or later. This process goes on with all objects of the world without exception. Those who take the worldly processes as real remain bound there. They fail to realize reality as transcending beyond the world and worldly activities. A true realization of the soul (atman) is the ultimate end of all worldly processes and activities, and this cannot be

achieved as long as takes the world as real. The world is not real as it is the product of maya. It only appears real due to the cover of avidya or maya.

Maya is due to ignorance. Coming out of ignorance is necessary to understand that the world has only an empirical or phenomenal reality and it in the ultimate analysis is unreal. Brahman is the only reality. Whatever is different from Brahman is unreal. It is neither being nor non-being, but shares the features of both being and non-being.

The universe and its things and beings are within the framework of space, time and causation. They are relative and finite. Hence they have a finite existence, knowledge and bliss, derived from Brahman, their source and ground and not that they possess them as their true nature. If the universe and its objects possess them as their nature, then they could exist by themselves, know themselves and enjoy themselves. But this does not happen since the universe and its objects require a knowing subject, jiva which is the reflection of the atman in being. If the objects are dissociated from the self, then they become non-entities since they derive the source and ground of their existence from the self. No one can ever be aware of the absence of the self since the very awareness is not possible without the self. But one can be aware of the absence of the universe in deep sleep. The universe as a phenomenal or empirical reality keeps on changing continuously, wherein some objects bow out of existence and some other objects come into existence. All these objects are contingent and have an empirical reality only. They are ultimately unreal.

The world is real only from a phenomenal standpoint. It is unreal from a metaphysical standpoint. The world appears to be real because of maya. In other words, the world is a product of maya. Those who are ignorant of the truth take the world as real, which is not actually so. The wise and the knowledgeable people see one and only one reality behind the illusory world. i.e. the Brahman.

The ignorance that causes illusion not only conceals reality, but also projects the world as real. As and when one comes out of ignorance, the world is no more as real.

Maya as the cause of the world appearance can be seen from two different standpoints. From a metaphysical standpoint, maya is only the will of God to produce the world appearance. It neither affects nor deceives him. It is only the ignorant people who are deceived, and hence see the world in multiplicity of forms as real instead of the reality of one God (Brahman). In this sense, maya is called as ajnana or avidya and it plays the dual role of concealing the real nature of Brahman and making him appear as something else. i.e. the world. From the standpoint of the wise and knowledgeable people, it can be seen that they are not deceived by the world show of maya. They perceive nothing but God in the world and for them. There is neither illusion nor illusion producing maya.

Where maya operates and the world is seen to have been created. It is asserted that as first from Brahman arises five subtle elements in the following order, i.e. akasha (ether), vayu (air), agni (fire), ap (water) and ksiti (earth). These five subtle elements mix up in five different remain in half the ratio and the other four in one-eighth proportion. This combination of the five elements is known as pancikarana. Man's subtle body is produced out of the combination of five subtle elements. His gross body and the gross objects of nature are produced out of the gross elements that arises out of the combination or the five subtle elements in different proportions. Sankara accepts this account of creation of the world, but in the sense of his theory of Vivartavada.

Sankara's view of God:

In the philosophy of Sankaracharya, God is understood from two different standpoints i.e. empirical and transcendental standpoints from an empirical standpoint (vyavaharikadrsti), God is regarded as the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the world. He is further as omniscient (all onowing)

and omnipotent (all powerful) and as possessing infinite qualities (saguna). Such a God possessing qualities is called as Saguna Brahman or Isvara. Isvara is worshipful. He is the object of devotion. Thus, there is duality of object of devotion and the devotee. This duality exists as long as one is ignorant of the true nature of reality. Even God as the creator of the world appears as real and true from an empirical point of view. We know that the world is a product of maya and hence unreal. Isvara with the power of maya projects the world in its multiplicity of forms and we out of ignorance accept the world as real, which is not actually so.

Though Isvara is taken as the creator of the world, yet the creatorship of the world does not constitute the true essence of Isvara. It is rather a mere accident appearing as true for all those ignorant. Further, the description of God as the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the world holds on good from an empirical point of view and fails to make any sense from a transcendental standpoint. For the wise, the world is a mere show. Neither the world is real nor there is any real creator of the world.

Isvara with the power of maya creates the world, the world is a mere reflection of Isvara. He is the witness and controller of the world. He creates the bodies of the jivas in the world in accordance with their actions. He also creates for the enjoyment of jivas.

Isvara is beyond merit and demerit. There are no imperfections in him. He is the ground and source of morality. Though he is omnipresent. Yet he appears in different particular forms. He is worshipped in these forms. He answers the prayers of the devotees and helps them their moral and spiritual pursuits. He is the ultimate person who always aims to help the people to attain liberation.

God is both immanent (in the world) and transcendent (beyond the world). Though immanent, he is not touched by the imperfections of the world. His real nature is transcendental. He is known as Brahman (The Supreme reality) from a transcendental standpoint, where he is untouched by the qualities

of the world. He is devoid of all internal and external distinctions. He remains indescribable by any aspect of the world. Even his description as infinite, pure consciousness, real etc. cannot touch him or his nature. It only denies of him finiteness, unconsciousness and unreality.

Brahman is beyond name and form. He is beyond all attribution and description. He cannot be described affirmatively since any affirmation negates him. He can only be described negatively as *neti neti* (this is not, this is not). Brahman is existence, consciousness and bliss. He is existent since He is not non-existence. He is conscious since He is not unconscious and He is bliss since He is not of the nature of non-bliss (or pain). Here a question may arise as to how can He be known. He is known by an immediate experience to all those who have a realization of their true nature as non-different from Brahman. The moment there is such a realization, they (the individual selves) become Brahman.

It is to be understood here that neither any individual nor the world nor even *Isvara* has existence apart from Brahman. The ideas of *Isvara* and *maya* have been put forth to resolve the issues linked with the world that are of pragmatic nature. Only *Nirguna* Brahman is real and He has been projected as *saguna* to serve the pragmatic purposes. The world of names, form etc. is just imposition on Brahman. Brahman is transcendental, eternal, unconditional and impersonal. Brahman veiled by *maya* is *Isvara*. *Isvara* is the connecting thread between Brahman and the world. Brahman is the transcendental reality and *Isvara* is the empirical reality. But at the transcendental level, there is no distinction between *Isvara* and Brahman since all dualisms disappear and everything merges into one. That one is Brahman. Even the knower of Brahman becomes Brahman. It is like a drop of water that merges with the ocean becomes the ocean.

Brahman is without distinctions. He alone was present in the beginning. He is not related to anything since there is nothing outside him to relate with him. He is homogeneous without any external and internal relations. He is pure consciousness and there is nothing in the world or even outside of it that

matches with him. He is one without the other. He is not brute matter. But it is supreme spirit who is perfect, real and existent. He is not a result or product, but is self caused and is the ground and source of everything. He is indefinable since there is nothing to define him. He can only be defined negatively as what he is not.

Brahman is unseen, ungraspable, impersonal, beyond limitations of space and time without any distinctive marks, unconceivable, the essence of all, and that into which everything resolves and is non dual. Being impersonal and transcendent. He cannot be predicated. He is over and above all relations and qualities. He is eternal and infinite pure consciousness. He is neither the subject nor the object nor even the unity of subject and object, but is an eternal, indeterminate and subject objectives consciousness. He cannot be grasped through a discursive intellect. He is only a matter of realization. He is self luminous, unconditional existence and infinite bliss. He is the only reality. He is the real of the reals.

Brahman, the Supreme reality differs from the God of religion. The God of religion has qualities and hence worshipful. But Brahman being devoid of qualities (nirguna), he is far away from being worshipful. This makes the critics to accuse Advaita Vedanta as atheistic. But this is not true to the spirit of Advaita Vedanta. This is because it puts forth the idea of Isvara (Apara Brahman) at the empirical level who is saguna and is also worshipful. After all prayer, worship etc. are concepts linked with the empirical world where there is a duality of subject and object and religion is a matter linked with the empirical world. No doubt religion points to the spirit in the highest plane of consciousness, but it is the preparatory ground for the people to move in the path of absolute Brahman through the realization of the true nature of one's own self.

For Sankara, self (atman) is Brahman. There is no distinction between the two. Both self and Brahman are beyond the senses, the mind and the intellect. But as said earlier, due to ignorance one limits the self within the body and identifies it with the senses, mind, intellect etc. Knowledge helps to

wipe out ignorance and on the attainment of true knowledge, one realizes that his self (atman) is not different from Brahman. It is one with Brahman or atman is Brahman. By the synthesis of Brahman and atman, Sankara negates dualism of all sorts and establishes a metaphysical, epistemological and axiological non-dualism.

Brahman alone is real. He is the basis of everything out there in the world, including knowledge. The knowledge of Brahman is the highest knowledge. It helps to get rid of the false knowledge concerning the world and souls.

Brahman is the knower, the known and the knowledge. He is beyond any distinction. He is the essence of all knowledge and existence.

Sankara's Conception of Self : The world is a product of maya. In the world, there are various living and non-living forms which appear real due to maya. Maya arises due to ignorance. As soon as one knows that he is in maya he becomes free from maya. Once the veil of maya is removed, the multiplicity resolves into a unity. Brahmin is the soul reality. A question arises here concerning the reality of the self. Beforehand it is important to note that in the philosophy of Samkaracharya though the self appears to be distinct and different from Brahman due to ignorance, yet in the true sense is totally non-different from Brahman. Self is indeed Brahman.

Man has a self. Self is a spiritual substance distinct and different from the body and the senses. It is not an object of perception, but is an object of realization. The realization of the true nature of self reveals that the self is nothing but Brahman. This being so, the self is not empirical, limited by the finiteness of the body. But is something beyond the world. It is pure consciousness that constitutes the essence of Brahman. If it is viewed apart from the conditions circumscribing it with the clearness of mind free from ignorance and veil of maya. Then it is identical with Brahman. The identity of the self with Brahman is a real identity, which implies that the self is of the nature of Brahman. It is luminous, infinite, pure and conscious.

The ignorance of the true nature of the self binds it in to the body. In such a state the self in no way realizes its true nature and identifies itself with the body, mind, intellect etc. it takes itself as finite, limited and conditional and goes after the worldly objects which are the products of maya, here the ego or "I" ness becomes strong and explicit via-a-vis others and the objects of the world and one makes statements as if he is distinct and different from all others outside him. The ego is confused with the self. The ego is only an apparent self and not the real self.

Sankara's view of the self is quite unique. It is not a simple substance, but is a subject object complex. The complex is of saksin and antahkarana. Saksin is the subject which is pure consciousness. Antahkarana is the object, the internal organ which is composed of the five elements with the predominance of tejas that makes it always active except in deep sleep. Saksin and Antahkarana in total co-operation of the senses function in the walking life. In dreams, saksin and antahkarana remain present, but there is no co-operation of the senses. In deep sleep, saksin alone exists with its avidya and antahkarana merges with avidya. The source of antahkarana is avidya which causes individually. In the state of liberation, avidya is destroyed by Jnana (knowledge) and saksin is realized in its true nature as pure consciousness (or Brahman).

The soul in the real sense is one and only one end that is the transcendental soul. Interpreted in this sense, the souls are not many in number. It is only the empirical egos that are many. The souls appear to be many because of our ignorance. Ignorance attaches all finitude, conditionally, misery, pain etc. to the soul. This makes the soul limited to the boundaries of the body, though it is not actually so. In its true essence, the soul is Brahman. It is not different from Brahman, i.e. it is identical with Brahman. The soul is the spark of Brahman and hence non-different from Brahman. The Chandogya Upanisad asserts that atman and Brahman are identical in essence. The subtle essence of the world is same as the essence of the self.

The self is luminous in itself. It transcends the duality of subject and object and the trinity of subject (knower), object (known) and the act of knowledge. It also transcends all categories of intellect. But it cannot be denied as something unreal since the very attempt of its denial presupposes it. It is self proved and no amount of demonstration can ever disprove it. Everything out there in the world is relative and unreal except the self. The self is absolute and essentially indescribable.

In the waking states, one identifies himself with the gross body and senses. In the dreaming states, he has memory consciousness of the objects perceived during the waking states or something of imagination or something totally unconnected and hence there is a feeling of being a subject or knower as opposed to the objects known. In the state of deep dreamless sleep. He ceases to be the knower of objects. The distinction of subject-object totally vanishes here. This being so, there is no longer a feeling that he is confined to the limitations of the body. Even in deep dreamless sleep. There is consciousness flowing in the body. This being the case, he knows after waking up that he had an undisturbed, dreamless sleep. A reflection on the dreamless sleep gives us a hint of the real nature of self when detached from identity with the body and senses. In its true nature, the self is not finite and limited (as defined by the limitations of the body), but is non-physical pure consciousness having extension beyond space and time. It is of the nature of the consciousness of Brahman provided that it is free from all bindings of the body, senses, mind etc. it is bound by the limitations of the body, senses, mind etc. due to ignorance of its nature. Once there is a true realization in the self that it is non-different from Brahman, it finds itself in total peace and happiness. In the true sense, self is infinite pure consciousness and bliss.

A man in waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep is conscious. The consciousness in him is due to the self. This is attested by the fact that on achieving death, there is no more consciousness as the self then leaves the body. Consciousness is the essence of the soul. The body in essence of the self. Being the essence of the self, consciousness cannot be differentiated or

separated from the self. Hence a distinction between self and consciousness can never be made.

The self is conscious in itself, consciousness is its essence. The consciousness in the self is in no way dependent on the subjects or the body, senses, mind etc. Hence there is no way to think or reason that consciousness in the self is an outcome or result of the relation of the self with the objects. Self is self-revealing consciousness. In its intrinsic nature, it is isolated and concealed from all objects.

The self is all pervading consciousness. It is one, single, non-dual, infinite, beyond space and time, eternal, ultimate etc. Sankara has described it as equipollent with Brahman. Brahman is omnipresent in the world in the form of self. There is a unity of self and Brahman which only a few realize. The men in ignorance do not realize this unity and take the self as distinct and different from Brahman. But the self like Brahman is existence, pure consciousness and bliss.

The self is the pivot around which all the activities of the body revolve but still it is beyond all these activities. Any activity of the body or mind is not possible by excluding the self. The self is always there, may it be in the waking state or dreaming state or dreamless sleep. If the self is imagined as being ultimately released from the body, then there is no activity in the body since the body then ceases to exist. It is the self that is real in man since the self may exist apart from the body, but the body cannot exist apart from the self. The self is Brahman in man. The different selves are like waters in different pots that are a part and parcel of one ocean (Brahman). The pots like the different bodies just demarcate one self from the other, but in reality, all individual selves lose identity selves lose identity in Brahman.

The self is attributeless, unconditional, infinite, all-pervading, transcendental and impersonal. A distinction needs to be made with jiva. The jiva is the empirical self that is conditional, limited, finite, personal and psychological. Jiva is not a mode of the self, but is a mere shadow or

reflection of the self in maya. It is the jiva that is bound, but the self is eternally liberated. The self is beyond merit and demerit, pleasure and pain, attachment and detachment, bondage and liberation etc. these all belongs to the jiva. The self is again beyond space, time and causation and hence nothing in the empirical world can ever affect it. The distinction between jiva and self exists at the empirical level due to ignorance and maya. At the transcendental level, all distinctions merge and self alone is seen to be real. It is eternal, infinite and transcendental. It is again existence, pure consciousness and bliss.

Sankara's Conception of Maya:- Maya may normally be taken to mean illusion. But it is not mere illusion, but appearance. It is the appearance of the world as real. Maya makes the world appear as real, though it is not so. Maya reflects of Brahman and projects him as the world of multiplicity of names and forms. Brahman reflected in maya is Isvara.

Sometimes a distinction is made between maya and avidya. The following things may be noted concerning this distinction: firstly, while maya is the objective aspect, avidya is the subjective aspect of one and the same phenomenon. Secondly, maya is the shakti (power) of Brahman, but avidya is the absence of the knowledge of reality. Thirdly, Brahman reflected in maya is Isvara and Brahman reflected in avidya is jiva. Fourthly, as right knowledge dawns, Avidya disappears, but maya being the inherent nature of Brahman remains eternal like Brahman and lastly while maya is composed of sattva guna, avidya is composed of all the three gunas of sattva, rajas and tamas.

It is important to note here that the advaitins Sankaracharya treat maya and avidya in synonymous terms. They make a distinction between the two aspects of maya or avidya which are known as avarana and viksepa. Avarana is the negative aspect of concealment of reality and viksepa is the positive aspect of projection of the world in its multiplicity of names and forms.

Sankaracharya puts forth the following characteristics of maya or avidya:

(a) Maya is the shakti (or power) of Brahman.

(b) Maya is totally dependant on Brahman and it is inseparable from him. The relation between maya and Brahman is called tadatmya.

(c) Maya is material ad unconscious (jada) as contrary to Brahman who is pure consciousness.

(d) it is beginningless (anadi).

(e) it has two aspects of avarana and viksepa. Avarana is the negative aspect of concealment of reality. Viksepa is the positive aspect of projection of the world of multiplicity of names and forms on the ground of Brahman.

(f) It is neither real nor unreal nor both real and unreal. Hence it is said to be indefinable and indescribable (sadasadanirvachaniya)

It is not real sine (i) it has no independent existence apart from Brahman and (ii) it vanishes soon there it a drawn of knowledge.

It is not unreal since (i) it projects the world multiplicity of names and forms and (ii) it is taken to be true as long as it lasts.

It is not both real and unreal sonce this very conception of being both real and unreal is self-contradictory.

(g) It is superimposition (adhyasa) of a character of one thing upon another thing. For instance, it is of the nature of superimposition of silveness on a piece of shell.

(h) It is not only the absence of right knowledge, but also positive wrong knowledges. It is not only non-apprehension, but also misapprehension.

(i) It vanishes with the dawn of right knowledge. The moment one knows that he is in maya, he ecomes mayamukta (free from maya)

(j) It is an appearance only (vivarta).

(k) It remains at the vyavaharika (or empirical) level only.

(l) It is the substratum and the object of Brahman. But Brahman remains untouched by it.

(m) It represents the limits of human knowledge. Man's ignorance is limited to this world alone. He sees the world as real and finds no reason to call it unreal. But when right knowledge dawns, the veil of maya disappears and there is a realization that Brahman is the sole reality.

(n) It is not a substance. Hence it cannot be said as the material cause of the universe. It is merely the instrumental cause.

Thus, the world is only appearance. It is a product of maya. It is not ultimately real. When knowledge dawns, it becomes sublated. But as long as we are in the world, we take the world as real for all practical purposes, though it is ultimately unreal as realized on the attainment of the true knowledge of reality.

