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Contemporary Interpretations of Shankara's Advaita and the Affirmation of the World

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Abstract

Shankara's Advaita Vedanta has been very influential in India, both as a well-articulated philosophical system and a weighty theological position. However, Advaita's supposedly dismissive attitude toward the world always remained its Achilles' heel. Thinkers whose sympathies lie firmly with Advaita are at pains to give a philosophically satisfactory explanation of the ontological status of the world. This article briefly discusses the efforts and resultant views of four such contemporary thinkers – K.C. Bhattacharyya, S. Radhakrishnan, P.T. Raju, and Richard De Smet.

Keywords

Advaita, Shankara, maya, Advaita and the world, K.C. Bhattacharyya, S. Radhakrishnan, P.T. Raju, Richard De Smet

1. The problematic of the world in Advaita Vedanta

During the entire 20th century, Advaita Vedanta was the single most influential philosophy in India. This was due in part to its endorsement by western Indologists like Max Mueller and Paul Deussen in the late 19th and early 20th century. However, Advaita's supposedly, or allegedly, dismissive attitude toward the world always remained its Achilles' heel, especially in the contemporary period when the empirical world has been given significant [page 294] philosophical and scientific importance. It is no easy task for any Advaitin to give an adequate world-affirming interpretation of Advaita, given that the system dismisses all distinctions as ontologically impossible and that the system was repeatedly dubbed *maya-vada* (theory of illusion) and crypto-Buddhism by its adversaries.¹

The Advaita doctrine as epitomized in Shankara's *Brahmasutra-bhashya* presents a robust form of monistic idealism.² On the authority of the Upanishads, the *Brahma-sutra*,

¹ See S. M. Srinivasa Chari, *Fundamentals of Visistadvaita Vedanta: A Study Based on Vedanta Desika's Tattva-mukta-kalapa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), 5; Hajime Nakamura, *A History of Early Vedanta Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), 121, 459; Sengaku Mayeda, "Sankara and Buddhism," in *New Perspectives on Advaita Vedanta: Essays in Commemoration of Professor Richard De Smet*, ed. Bradley J. Malkovsky (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 18-19.

² By scholarly consensus, the *Brahmasutra-bhashya* is considered the most authentic work of Shankara. The Shankarite authorship of the *Upadeshasahasri*, the *Brihadaranyaka-bhashya*, and the *Taittiriya-bhashya* is also generally accepted. See Karl H. Potter, ed., *Advaita Vedanta up to Samkara and His Pupils*, vol. 3 of *The Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981), 115-16.

and the *Mandukya-karika*, Shankara accepted Brahman as the absolute truth about reality. If Brahman is the sole reality, the reality of the world has to be toned down. Shankara explained the world in terms of illusion (*maya*) and superimposition (*adhyasa*).

The world for Advaita is an illusory appearance of Brahman and the world's ontological status as real is only an erroneous superimposition on Brahman. In the classic rope-snake example, the illusory snake is superimposed on the rope. Until the discrimination between the rope and the snake takes place, the snake is regarded as real, on account of the reality of the rope. Similarly, when discriminatory knowledge (*vidya*) arises, you realize that all differences are unreal and reality is ultimately non-dual (*advaita*). This non-dual reality of your higher experience is Brahman, and the world of your empirical experience, which is Brahman's appearance, is only apparently real. Advaita explains away all empirical experience and knowledge as ultimately your erroneous superimposition on Brahman. A well-known epigram attributed to Shankara captures the gist of Advaita: "Brahman is real, the world is unreal, and the individual self is identical to Brahman."³

We discuss briefly the views of four academic philosophers of Advaitic leanings, who tried to give some reinterpretations to Advaita, so it can better and more positively account for the world of our empirical and human experiences. K.C. Bhattacharyya (1875-1949), S. Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), P.T. Raju (1904-92), and Richard De Smet (1916-97) are chosen for their long-

[\[page 295\]](#)standing stability in the Advaitic tradition and their divergent readings of that very same tradition.

2.1. K.C. Bhattacharyya

Bhattacharyya tried to understand Vedanta in light of Kant and Hegel, and Kant and Hegel in light of Vedanta.⁴ From Kant he learnt the importance of the rational, ethical and aesthetic aspects of human subjectivity, and from Hegel, the dialectic of the Absolute. But at the same time he rejected the Kantian agnosticism about the transcendent (noumenon) and the Hegelian absolutization of the Absolute.

Bhattacharyya disagreed with the Kantian thesis that the Transcendent (the Self) as a thing-in-itself is not knowable to theoretical reason but is accepted only as an object of moral faith (practical reason). He classified epistemological objects into speakables, thinkables, and knowables. All speakables are knowables, but not all knowables are thinkables. The Self is speakable, though inadequately, but not thinkable using empirical categories. Even as the Self is not thinkable empirically (intellectively), it can be known transcendently (intuitively).⁵

Different levels of human consciousness are involved in understanding different speakables. At the level of empirical consciousness, the objects of our knowing are empirical facts. Such abstract concepts as universals, life, and mind are the objects of pure objective consciousness. The ego-sense, the awareness of my empirical (psychological) self, constitutes subjective consciousness. The highest level or form of consciousness is transcendental consciousness. Here the object of our knowing is the inner Self (the Absolute), known

³ In verse 20 of the *Brahma-jnanavali-mala*, a non-Shankarite work of later period, we read, "Brahma satyam, jaganmithya, jivo Brahmaiva narah."

⁴ For Bhattacharyya's writings, see Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Philosophy*, ed. Gopinath Bhattacharyya (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2008).

⁵ For an Advaita Vedantin, knowledge (*vidya*) is the paramount way toward the summum bonum, namely the *Brahma-sakshatkara* (Self-realization).

intuitively.⁶ At the empirical level, which is the level of science, speaking is literal and the aim is to get information about the world. At the other three levels, which are the levels of philosophy, the speaking is symbolic and the aim is to find the meaning of our experience.

Related to the levels of consciousness are the three levels of self-realization (realization of our subjectivity). In bodily subjectivity, we identify our self with the body; in psychic subjectivity, the self is identified with the mind; and in pure subjectivity, the self is realized as freedom (freedom from all objectivity), the Absolute.

The Absolute as pure subjectivity is devoid of all objectivity. In this regard, Bhattacharyya believed that the concept of *maya* is indispensable [page 296] to the Shankarite monism and its understanding of the world. The reality of cosmic *maya*, the world, and our experience of it is akin to the illusory snake in the rope-snake example. The illusory snake is experienced in three stages, according to Bhattacharyya. In the first stage the snake is believed to be real. In the second stage this belief is corrected and we come to know the snake is unreal. In the third stage we know the snake is unreal at all times, both now and at the time we perceived it as real. Like the snake in the third stage, *maya* is neither existent nor non-existent but absolute nought. Both its appearance and its retraction are unreal.

Bhattacharyya's most remarkable idea is his notion of the Absolute as alternation. Instead of the Hegelian absolutization of the Absolute, he chose the dialectics of alternation both at transcendental and empirical levels of reality. The triple functions of consciousness in relation to its contents are: knowing, feeling, and willing. Each of them has its own formulation of the Absolute, namely truth, value, and freedom respectively. When cognition is given importance, the Absolute is viewed as truth; when emotion (devotion) is given importance, it is viewed as value; and when volition is given importance, it is viewed as freedom. These conceptions of the Absolute cannot be unified into one, because each is Absolute in turn.⁷ For Bhattacharyya, this *alternation* is not just our symbolic speaking about the one Absolute in three distinct ways, but the very constitution (dynamics) of the Absolute.⁸

2.2. S. Radhakrishnan

Radhakrishnan tried to make Vedanta, especially the Shankara Vedanta, more appealing and meaningful to the modern mind.⁹ Besides Advaita, his principal source of philosophizing, Radhakrishnan made use of ideas from Western idealism, modern science, Christianity, and Buddhism.

Radhakrishnan was a devoted defender of religion and spirituality against the challenges of modern science. In his philosophy, it is hard to distinguish between philosophical thinking and religious thinking. As against the usual understanding of intellectual reflection (discursive reasoning) as the method of philosophy, he proposed

⁶ From the advaitic (non-dualistic) point of view, this intuitive knowing of the Self is nothing but the Self (the Absolute) knowing itself.

⁷ This gives reason and legitimacy to philosophical and religious pluralism.

⁸ If the alternation (alternation of truth, value, and freedom) itself is constitutive of the Absolute is an open question, however. Cf. Gopinath Bhattacharyya, "Editor's Introduction," in Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Philosophy*, xliii. The similarity appears not so much to the Hegelian dialectic as to the Kantian notion of triple-reason (pure reason, practical reason, and aesthetic reason).

⁹ For Radhakrishnan's philosophical views, see mainly his *An Idealist View of Life* (1932, 1937) and the introduction to his *The Brahma Sutra: The Philosophy of Spiritual Life* (1960).

intuition as the method. While science describes the empirical world, philosophy interprets and explains the ultimate nature,

[page 297] meaning, and purpose of the universe by intuitive knowledge. The intuitive apprehension (understanding) provides us with immediate, personal experience of reality. This intuitive apprehension is the very activity of the spirit within us.

The idealist view of life and reality, which Radhakrishnan calls religion of the spirit, perceives the universe as ultimately spiritual. Brahman (Atman/ the Spirit) being the ultimate truth and the universe its self-manifestation, the spirit is our deepest self. Radhakrishnan wanted all historical religions to transform themselves into the religion of the spirit, a spiritual vision that transforms the world and ensures human unity, universal moral order, and world peace.

Radhakrishnan tried to work out a positive account of the world by interfacing three concepts – Brahman (the Absolute), Ishvara (God), and the world. Brahman considered in its self-identity as pure consciousness is beyond all distinctions, qualifications, and descriptions. This one, absolute being, however, manifests itself as the world. The world is just one possibility of Brahman's self-manifestation; other possibilities we may not know. Brahman in its relation to the world is Ishvara (God). Ishvara is Brahman's creative aspect, conceived as creator, redeemer, and judge. Immanent in the world, Ishvara guides and transforms it. Ishvara lasts as long as the world-process lasts.

Although the transformation of the world is God's action, it is essentially linked with human transformation. Despite limitations, human evolution and progress is teleological and moves toward a greater good.¹⁰ Human calling is to co-operate with the divine plan for the world's transformation. Typical of an Advaitin, Radhakrishnan held that our deepest self (atman) is identical to the transcendental Self (Atman) and is above transmigration. What is subject to transmigration is *jiva*, the empirical self. The world-process lasts until all *jivas* are liberated.¹¹ When all *jivas* are liberated, the world will be transformed into *Brahma-loka* (the kingdom of God). The world and all *jivas* become one with God and God will be all in all. And finally the *Brahma-loka*, along with Ishvara, will lapse into Brahman. Thus Brahman remains the beginning and the end of the world. If and when another world-process begins is left to the freedom of Brahman.

2.3. P.T. Raju

Raju's entire philosophizing revolved around the concept of I-am.¹² The uppercase I-AM stands for the supreme Self (Brahman) and the lowercase

[page 298] I-am for the individual self (atman). The latter is the gateway by which we access the former. The philosophy of I-am, according to Raju, accounts for the Vedantic doctrine of the transcendence and immanence of the spirit.

My existence is fundamentally an I-am experience, as my existence (am-ness) and consciousness (self-awareness) are united in it. I-am experience is self-evident, as it does not require any external proof. In my I-am experience, I am directly aware of my am-ness. It is on this fundamental I-am experience that all other experiences are founded. The philosophy of I-am thus forms the foundation for a philosophy of life.

¹⁰ According to Radhakrishnan, regress rebirth is a remote possibility. For human beings there may not be a going back to sub-human levels.

¹¹ Meanwhile, the liberated *jivas* take birth as *bodhisattvas* (*jivan-muktas*) for the benefit of humanity.

¹² For Raju's philosophical views, see mainly his *Spirit, Being, and Self* (1982) and sections on "General Estimate and Constructive Comment" in his *Structural Depths of Indian Thought* (1985).

I-am is involved in all my cognitive activities. All my mental activities presuppose the existence of a dynamic I. I cannot meaningfully make even a simple statement like “This is a pen,” if I am not aware that I am aware of a pen. In this regard, Raju draws a distinction between I-am (ontological self) and I-think (empirical or phenomenological self). The former continues and the latter changes. The latter is an aggregate of psychological experiences and the former is the synthesizer of this aggregate. The empirical self undergoes changes, but the ontological self endures through these changes. My ontological self is involved in all my activities, and yet transcends them all. Without a dynamic self to synthesize our experiences, we cannot experience the world. It is the ontological self in us that organizes our empirical experiences into time, space, and causality.¹³

If my existence is fundamentally an I-am experience, the Supreme Being must also be an I-AM experience. The argument is from unity of being. Being (is-ness) is the same for all entities. The difference is only in how this one being is manifested. A horse and a human are ontologically (in is-ness aspect) same, but phenomenologically different. The source from which all is-ness derives is the supreme I-AM. The world has no is-ness of its own, apart from that of Brahman. On the question of how the world of objectivity comes out of Brahman, which is pure subjectivity, Raju would say the world does not come out of Brahman directly, but from its power (*shakti*). The world comes out of Brahman’s *shakti* and is absorbed back to Brahman through the same *shakti*. In other words, the world is the transformation of Brahman’s power, rather than of Brahman itself.¹⁴ Brahman and its power are nonetheless inseparable, like fire and its power to burn.

The world, for Raju, is very much real and it cannot be dismissed as illusion (*maya/mithya*). The world is said to be illusory or unreal only at the [page 299] higher level, where it is contrasted to Brahman, who is the ontological source of all existents. The word *maya*, in fact, should be taken in its etymological meaning. According to Raju, the word *maya* is derived from the verbal root *ma*, meaning “to measure.” The world is called *maya*, because it is “measured” in time and space, in contrast to Brahman that cannot be measured.

And coming to the question whether the individual I-am (atman) is identical to the supreme I-AM (Brahman), Raju seems to neither affirm nor deny it. He would rather say they are ontologically the same, because the being of my I-am is derived from the supreme I-AM. So it may be said that my I-am is inherently infinite and essentially one with I-AM. Moreover, for me my I-am is the gateway to the supreme I-AM. I can know and experience I-AM only as my I-am.

2.4. Richard De Smet

The Belgian-born Indian philosopher Richard De Smet tried to give a Christian, or rather Thomistic, reading to Shankara’s non-dualism by interpreting Brahman as the non-dual substantive (existence-giving) cause, standing in a non-reciprocal relation to the universe.¹⁵

The Brahman of Advaita, the non-qualified Brahman, has usually been taken to be impersonal, in contrast with the personal God (the qualified Brahman) of other Vedantic

¹³ Raju is not denying the objective reality of time, space, and causality. Rather, the point is to underscore the importance of ontological self, I-am.

¹⁴ In “Transcendence and Historicity in the Self as Atman” (*Idealistic Studies* 20 [1990]: 203-29), Raju speaks of three forms this transformation: God (*Ishvara*), subtle cosmic form (*Hiranyagarbha*), and gross cosmic form (*Virat*).

¹⁵ For De Smet’s writings, see Richard De Smet, *Brahman and Person*, ed. Ivo Coelho (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2010); Richard De Smet, *Understanding Sankara*, ed. Ivo Coelho (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2013).

schools. But De Smet would argue that personality (personhood) is applicable to the non-qualified (*nirguna*) Brahman of Advaita as well.¹⁶ The concept of “person” signifies the ultimate subject of attribution of intellectual activities like knowledge and consciousness. If pure consciousness is the defining characteristic of Brahman, the non-dual Brahman can also be referred to as person, indeed a super-person.

Regarding the Advaitic view of the world, De Smet would hold that Shankara’s philosophy is not illusionistic and acosmic. The notion of *maya* implies not so much the negation of the world as the affirmation of Brahman who is the substantive cause of the world. On the level of ordinary speaking, both the world and its substantive cause (Brahman) are beings.¹⁷ But Brahman transcends its effects so immensely, that compared with Brahman the universe is considered unreal (*maya*). The being of the world is only a participation [page 300] in the being of Brahman, and as a participated being, the world is ultimately non-being.¹⁸

De Smet further interprets the meaning of Shankara’s “advaita” (non-dualism) as “*tadatmya*” (identity) of non-reciprocal nature. As non-reciprocal relation, *tadatmya* is having *Tat* (That, i.e. Brahman) as one’s own *atman*, inner being. What it means is that Brahman is the substantive cause of one’s being.¹⁹ *Tadatmya* is not unique to the individual self (*atman*) alone, but it imbues all effects of Brahman. Brahman, being the substantive (existence-giving) cause of the universe, is the innermost self of every entity. All things have their self, their being, in Brahman, but Brahman has not its self in them. Thus the non-duality implied by *tadatmya*, at both individual and cosmic levels, does not eliminate distinctions, but only underscores the pervading causal presence of Brahman, immanent in all things and at the same time transcendent.

3. Observations and comments

The philosophers we discussed above have provided diverse views as to how we can better understand Advaita’s take on the ontological status of the world in relation to Brahman. Here the question of who remained more faithful to the Advaitic tradition is immaterial. As creative thinkers, they took the freedom of philosophizing, and hence their different interpretations. Even as remaining committed to classical Advaita in their own way, they critiqued that very same tradition to make it more relevant and meaningful in contemporary times.

Out of the four, Bhattacharyya is stronger and more focussed in the analysis of human subjectivity at its various levels. But he appears lacking in his analysis of the world. This does

¹⁶ According to De Smet, Brahman is called *nirguna* not because it is impersonal or without qualities, but because its qualities are identical to itself. Brahman’s *nirgunatva* is here considered as analogous to the Thomistic notion of divine simplicity.

¹⁷ “On the level of ordinary language, creaturely effects and their Cause are beings (*sat*), are imbued with existence (*satta*)” (De Smet, *Understanding Sankara*, 377).

¹⁸ Here the Thomistic idea of participation, i.e. creatures participate in God’s being, is at the back of De Smet’s mind.

¹⁹ Unlike a reciprocal relation, the two terms (here Brahman and *atman*) are not interchangeable in a non-reciprocal relation. In order to substantiate his view, De Smet appeals to the analogy of the face and its reflection (in the mirror) discussed in *Upadeshasahasri*, chapter 2.18. Just as a face is reflected in a mirror, the Self is reflected in the ego (the empirical self) and makes it appear like the Self. De Smet takes this to imply that the individual self is a reflection (image) of the supreme Self and thus in *tadatmya* relation with it. It seems that De Smet has taken here a view different than what the chapter in question originally meant. The original import of part 2, chapter 18 of the *Upadeshasahasri* was to show “that” and “thou” in “that art thou” express the same reality (see US 2.18.170-71).

not mean that Bhattacharyya is dismissive of the word as total *maya*. His philosophy is not without some inherent potential to give a positive account of the world. The first two levels human consciousness, namely empirical consciousness and pure objective consciousness, do not make sense without reference to the real world. Nor can we explain bodily subjectivity and psychic subjectivity without taking into consideration the world of our empirical experience. And his idea of the triple-absolute, the Absolute as truth, freedom, and value alternatively, is apparently

[page 301] the prototype of the three subjective functions – knowing, willing, and feeling – we perform in relation to the world of our everyday experience.

Unlike Bhattacharyya, Radhakrishnan attempted at constructing a grand metaphysical narrative after the manner of Western idealists like Kant and Hegel.²⁰ He tried to bring into his system all aspects of reality we experience – religious, empirical and scientific, and ethical. The world for Radhakrishnan is very much real and it cannot be underrated as illusion. The world, however, is called *maya* because of its temporal (passing) character. The world is being, for it exists for a time; the world is non-being, for it does not exist for all times. Brahman is the only being that exists for all times, and it is the substratum of all other forms of existence. So we may say the world as *maya* is neither real nor unreal. Radhakrishnan's real explainer of the world is not *maya* but his Ishvara concept though. He presented Ishvara as the connecting link between Brahman (pure subjectivity) and the world (objectivity), thus keeping his idealist view of reality compatible with a realist view of the world. Ishvara is the creative aspect of Brahman. Endowed with the creative power of *maya*, Ishvara will endure as long as the world-process continues. Ishvara is Brahman immanent in the world and becoming its organizer and guide. Ishvara is not Brahman just looked at in relation to the world, as commonly understood, but rather the very first phase of Brahman's unfolding.

Raju shared many of his philosophical views with Radhakrishnan, as both were interested in defending a grand idealist view of life. In the later part of his philosophical career, however, Raju narrowed down his reflections to a single unifying concept, namely I-am. He used the concept of I-am as the hermeneutic key to interpret and understand reality at different levels. In I-am, consciousness and existence meet and merge into a single entity. This becomes the basis of the Advaitic view of reality. Brahman, atman, and the world are different levels of I-am existence and experience. At the subjective individual level, reality is experienced as my enduring self, my I-am. In my self-transcendence, the supreme Self is experienced as I-AM. The world of objectivity (I-think) may be out there, but I cannot experience or comprehend it without linking it to my I-am, so much so that I can say my I-am is conferring existence on the world. Here Raju is not denying the objective existence of the world but only trying to explain the ontological and epistemological link that exists between subjectivity (the self) and objectivity (the world). It is ultimately the supreme I-AM that confers existence on the world, which is the modification of its creative energy (*shakti/maya*).

[page 302] While Bhattacharyya, Radhakrishnan, and Raju philosophized from within one main tradition, De Smet did his thinking from within two, namely Advaita and Thomism. On the one hand it put some constraint on his interpretation of Advaita, but on the other it provided him with an opportunity to explore a new line of reflection. He argued

²⁰ But owing to syncretic style and idea overload in his writings, it can sometimes be hard to identify his definitive position on a specific problem. As for his views on the ontological character of the world, however, we have relied primarily on the final chapter of his *An Idealist View of Life* and his introduction to *The Brahma Sutra: The Philosophy of Spiritual Life*.

that the Brahman of Shankara can also be viewed as a person, granted that consciousness is the hallmark of personality. For De Smet the ultimate truth about “advaita” is that Brahman is the substantive cause, inherent in all beings. As the source of all being, Brahman is the only reality. As to the ontological status of the individual self and the world, theirs is only a participated existence. What is denied by Advaita is not their reality but their independent reality. They are ontologically dependent on Brahman, who De Smet sees as eminently personal in nature and the object of intellectual contemplation and love. On the whole, De Smet’s interpretation of Advaita may have been greatly influenced by Thomism, but his philosophy as creative cross-cultural philosophizing is a case in point.