

主催・公益財団法人 日独文化研究所

共催・テュービンゲン大学 CIIS (Center for International and Intercultural Studies)  
デュッセルドルフ「恵光」日本文化センター (EKÖ-Haus der Japanischen Kultur e.V.)

後援・仏教伝道協会 (BDK)

シンポジウム

# 「仏教とキリスト教の〈自然〉」

— プロシーディング集 —

**Proceedings vom Symposium**

**„Die ‚Natur‘ in Buddhismus und Christentum“**

Veranstalter: Gemeinnützige Stiftung Japanisch-Deutsches Kulturinstitut

Mit-Veranstalter: CIIS (Center for Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Studies)  
EKÖ-Haus der Japanischen Kultur e.V. in Düsseldorf

Unterstützer: BDK (Bukkyô Dendô Kyôkai, Society for the Promotion of Buddhism)

発行・編集 公益財団法人日独文化研究所

Herausgegeben von der Gemeinnützigen Stiftung  
Japanisch-Deutsches Kulturinstitut



# A philosophical merry-go-round – Nature, Self and Self-Nature in Advaita Vedānta

Robert Lehmann

## Abstract

Der Beitrag nimmt zeitgenössische Versuche, süd- und ostasiatische Philosophien auf ihre begrifflichen Ressourcen für die Lösung umweltphilosophischer Probleme hin zu befragen, zum Anlass, den Begriff der Natur in der Tradition des klassischen Advaita-Vedānta zur Diskussion zu stellen. Zunächst werden die Ambiguität des europäischen Naturbegriffs und entsprechende Äquivalenzen im indischen Kontext skizziert. Daraufhin ist eine verbreitete Lesart zu rekonstruieren, die in dem nicht-dualen Vedānta Śāṅkaras die illusionistische Variante eines akosmischen Monismus vertreten sieht und diese Ontologie als Beleg dafür anführt, dass ein entsprechendes Natur-Verständnis lediglich zu einer Entfremdung von und Verachtung für die natürliche Welt führen kann. Wenn sich diese Interpretation unter bestimmten Voraussetzungen auch als richtig erweist, verkennt sie den Umstand, dass die im westlichen Begriff angelegte Ambiguität von „Natur“ als Gesamtheit der Erscheinungen (*jagat, prakṛti, nāmarūpa, māyā*) einerseits, als das Wesen dieser Gesamtheit (*svabhāva*) andererseits im Vedānta Śāṅkaras nicht auf ein ontologisches Problem, sondern auf eine methodologische Strategie nicht-dualer Philosophie verweist.

“Nature”, like everything else, can be a *subject of* philosophy. As such the striking ambiguity of this term may be considered as fruitful as it can be exhausting. For it allows glimpses into the basic self-understanding of a culture. It may represent the cornerstone of a metaphysical architecture, the great self-evidence of modern science or the major social concern of our time. If something turns into the subject of philosophy, it generally means that it also becomes the *object of* enquiry.

Nature as a starting point for an interreligious dialogue, though, is not just some subject of philosophy but a genuine philosophical problem. And philosophical problems, in turn, are not necessarily problems *of* philosophy, in fact they rarely are – they are problems of life, and hence existential problems.

What happens if we treat the over-determined concept of nature as a subject of philosophy can be seen in the contemporary attempts to find out whether the non-dual philosophy of classical Advaita Vedānta can provide *conceptual resources* for an environmental philosophy and corresponding ethics. These attempts to find conceptual resources in South and East Asian philosophies not only display, as Larson rightly pointed out<sup>1)</sup>, an at times brutally unreflective economic metaphorism. They also presuppose, where in search for non-dual philosophies, a dualistic pre-decision. Nature is already considered an object. Now ways must be found to no longer confront this object in an exploitative and destructive way, but to understand it as a valuable object worthy of protection and saving.

From this dualistic predisposition a better-known philosophical tension thus might ensue, i. e. the interrelation between nature as the whole of creation or appearances and, on the other hand, the essence of this whole. Within the non-dual Vedānta of Śāṅkara nature, however, is not merely acknowledged as a subject of philosophy in either of these meanings but, as I will show, considered to be a philosophical problem deeply connected with the methodological strategy and existential urgency of the non-dual endeavor.

## 1. Concepts of nature in Western and in Indian philosophy

What we firstly have to acknowledge then is the ambiguity of the term “nature”. And with it the well-known tendency in philosophy that the most ambiguous terms are also the most appealing ones. I will not speculate on the *raison d’être* of this tendency here. But in contrast with the concepts of “personhood” or “dialectics” earning their ambiguity through a long history of transformation the concept of nature seems to be ambiguous ever since.

### a) Western notions

Alone in his *Physics* and the corresponding parts of *Metaphysics* Aristotle explores four meanings of “nature”. With reference to the etymology of *physis*, “nature” is firstly defined as a process of becoming, nature in this sense is “the genesis of growing things”. It is, secondly, that immanent principle from which a growing thing first begins to grow, e.g. the basic substance or seed. It can, thirdly, mean the primary stuff, the original matter of which any natural object consists of or from which it is produced. Fourthly, nature is the unity of matter and form, the stuff objects are made from and the immanent perfection of their becoming. Thus, the

concept of *physis* is fairly close to the concept of *ousia*, the essence of natural objects. (1014b, 16–1015a, 19.)

And not only is it the teleological meaning Aristotle regards as the fundamental one. This notion also allows for the understanding of nature as a meaningfully ordered whole that man finds himself embedded in, a cosmos. For the Greeks, nature was the expression of the whole of moving being, including man, and at the same time the ground, the essence of this whole.

But within this cosmos Aristotle finds things that are, as we say, *by nature* and things that arise from other causes, such as art (*techné*), chance (*tyché*) and intention (*prohairesis*). Things that are *by nature*, such as animals, plants, and their parts etc., differ from things that are not by nature in that they owe their motion to an inner principle, while things that arise from *techné*, *tyché* or *prohairesis* do not have this inner beginning of motion in themselves.

As is widely assumed with the rise of Christian monotheism this essential autonomy and self-sufficiency of nature gives way to a deeper structural dependence of what there is on an all-supreme Deity. But not only does the absolute transcendence of the personal creator-God seem to strip nature of its vital autonomy, at the latest with the Christology of the early Renaissance, man himself – in a unique *imago Dei* – becomes creator in his own right.

The famous narrative in which Pico della Mirandola set into the western world the idea “of man as lord of the world”, may be just a modern projection. But his retelling of Genesis and the biblical idea of man’s dominion over nature nevertheless marks a starting point for a resolute distance from the cosmos and expresses what we may call an *anthropocentric dualism* of man and nature.<sup>2)</sup> This dualism expresses an ever greater distance and finally an oppositional concept of nature that allows human subjectivity not only to conceptualize itself as independent from nature but likewise to relate thereto in a hierarchical manner.

For the purpose of my talk, it is not necessary to develop this notion any further into the cartesian or functional dualisms of modern science. It is enough to point to the structural dualism that allows for a conceptualization of a human subjectivity that transcends nature to the extent that it can make it an object. Any attempt to understand the laws of nature and the oppositional position of man in it sets out from objectivation in this basic sense.

## b) Indian notions

Now, it comes as no surprise that a highly ambiguous term like “nature” has no equivalent in other languages that would depict this diversity of meaning in one word.

But it is possible to give hints at what may be considered a conceptual equivalent to the Western term “nature” in the philosophical systems of the orthodox brahmanic traditions that developed on the Indian subcontinent. Although there are some interesting concepts to consider in the *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika*, or the atomistic and materialistic traditions I will content myself with two notions that are central for Advaita Vedānta.

The first one to take into account is *svabhāva* – a central concept in both ontology and epistemology that is usually translated to “intrinsic nature”, “own being” – or simply “self-nature”. It plays both a vital role in Nāgārjuna’s exposition of *sūnyatā* in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and in the earliest text of the Advaita-tradition, Gauḍapāda’s commentary on the *Māṇḍūkyaupaniṣad*. I will not enter the discussion of Gauḍapāda as a crypto-buddhist. Still, it is worth noticing, that there is strong evidence for the claim that Gauḍapāda is both in terminological as well as methodical manners heavily influenced by the *Madhyamaka*.<sup>3)</sup> For Gauḍapāda “self-nature” means, as he states in the fourth chapter of his *kārikā*, ”that [...] which is permanently established, intrinsic, innate, not produced, [and] that which does not abandon its own nature.”<sup>4)</sup>

The term *svabhāva* determines firstly what is essential to something in the sense that it is “intrinsic” to this object and considered to be a property the object could not lack without ceasing to be that very object. So, the *svabhāva* of fire is to be hot and bright etc. It can, secondly, mean something that is unchanging, not brought about by any causal process and not depending on anything else, in other words, it is absolute. In this sense *svabhāva* may be either understood in terms of the substance or substratum of individual objects or in terms of an absolute reality – and it is this understanding that is the cause of ongoing arguments between Advaitins and Buddhists.

The traditional dispute presents itself as follows: While Nāgārjuna claims that everything is empty of self-nature without falling into the trap of hypostasizing emptiness in result as the ultimate reality of things, for Gauḍapāda and with him Śaṅkara and his Pupils there is but one absolute *self-nature*, and that is *brahman*, respectively the *ātman*<sup>5)</sup>.

Now, if we take a closer look at Gauḍapāda’s definition of self-nature we actually find three words, that need to be translated with “nature” or “natural”: *svabhāva*, *sahajā*, and *prakṛti*.

The term *prakṛti* is the second prominent concept that is notoriously translated with “nature”. This may be due to the fact that in many modern Indian languages the western term “nature” is translated as “prakṛti”. Conversely, however, especially when it comes to archaic and classical Sanskrit-texts this correspondance can be problematic.<sup>6)</sup>

In most of the early Advaita-texts *prakṛti* is just used synonymous with *svabhāva*, in the meaning of essence or primary substance. But as a philosophical terminus technicus *prakṛti* likewise is a key concept of one of better-known philosophical schools in India, called Sāṃkhya. In its mature form it is commonly reconstructed as a strict dualistic ontology in which *prakṛti* stands for “matter” or “materiality” or “physical nature”, a female principle that comes into manifestation so that it can be seen by the *puruṣa* – a male principle for which “man”, “human” or “person” may stand. It is considered an individual but impersonal, pure and contentless consciousness, and as such a detached witness to creation. It is not necessary to go much to deeper into this fascinating philosophy. But it is worth noticing that for Sāṃkhya the natural world is not confined to the physical universe opposed to the creations of man or the inner realm of psychological events. On the contrary. What we may consider the sensorial, psychological, cognitive, or even transcendental faculties of consciousness are all elements of *prakṛti*.<sup>7)</sup> So, we must be careful when we read the famous soteriological conclusion of Sāṃkhya, namely that to gain final liberating knowledge (*jñāna*) means to realize that *puruṣa* is entirely separate from *prakṛti*.<sup>8)</sup> The ontological distance invoked here cannot be turned easily into a hierarchical or hegemonial opposition. All elements of human subjectivity that would allow for such an elevation are genuine part of the manifest universe.

In one of the most influential orthodox systems of Indian thought we find an elaborate dualism. Although build around the strict opposition of matter and consciousness it can hardly develop into an *anthropocentric dualism*, for that would presuppose an engaged subjectivity opposing nature.

What should we expect then from a metaphysical system that like the Advaita Vedānta, is readily understood as a radical version of an ontological monism?

The philosophers of the non-dual tradition of Vedānta are confronted with a major difficulty: they constantly referring to a reality that is apparently not recognised as such within the framework of its philosophical rendering: *brahma satyaṃ jagan mithyā*<sup>9)</sup>, as the famous saying goes, “Brahman is real, the world is false.”

The term *jaḡat* in this sentence, often translated with ‘world’ or ‘nature’ in the sense of the whole of creation, determines the sphere of living, moving things, the world of impermanent phenomena. In order to deny the reality of the fleeting and therefor painful sphere of existence Śāṅkara sees the ontological necessity to claim an ultimate reality in which the ephemeral world of “names and forms” (*nāmarūpa*) is grounded in.<sup>10)</sup>

To claim this ultimate reality is usually regarded as an expression of a form of *substantialism*. Which is a little odd, considering that *brahman* in its purest sense is *nirguṇa brahman*, utterly without attributes, self-identical and self-luminous consciousness and one without there being a second. It is not only difficult to make sense of a notion of substance that is not a correlate of any accidentia and propria. A substance that is distinct from nothing because it is self-fulfilled oneness, is – ontological speaking – a rather useless notion. And if the intrinsic nature of something is what allows this thing to be what it is, and thus above all determines what it is not, then an ultimate essence that cannot be determined any further is redundant. But in Śāṅkaras Vedānta, as we shall see, this reality is not only objectively unavailable and hence unidentifiable. The emphasis on *brahman* as the ultimate self-nature which renders the world a mirage is furthermore based on a phenomenology of an intimate delusion of the *ātman*. Therein its structural hypostasis plays a vital methodological role: As I will show in the course of my contribution, the *hypostasis of the self-nature* of *ātman* is the major means of its disillusion.

## 2. Advaita Vedānta without subtelties

In recent discussions about the concept of nature in Advaita Vedānta, the problem of self-nature is rarely acknowledged, though. Instead, two main tendencies of enquiry can be discerned. They often combine two rather vague notions of nature: The metaphysical concept of nature as the material universe, the totality of the cosmos, the world of multiplicity and change and the modern notion of nature as environment to which one can relate emphatically. On the one hand we find an often unreflected promotion of the promises of unity and “substantive oneness of nature across all creation”<sup>11)</sup> associated with a rather naïve notion of non-duality. This neo-advaita-idea of “everything is one” is emphasizing an existential dimension and ending up with demanding reversion and admiration *for* nature. On the other hand, we find strongly sceptical voices arguing that the ontological doctrines of classical Advaita Vedānta necessarily lead to an “alienation from, and



disdain for, the natural world.”<sup>12)</sup> By reducing Śaṅkara's philosophy to a radical acosmic monism its existential dimension is simply left aside. The first direction tips into an overly sentimental, the second into an overly technical view of what the non-dual version of Vedānta has to offer when it comes to the conceptual resources for an environmental philosophy.

Although I am not directly concerned here with ecological questions or environmental concerns it is unavoidable to keep such topics in mind when talking about the relationship between man and nature in the 21st century. In the last 40 years there has been a tendency of glancing eastward to find conceptual alternatives to the metaphysical categories and social practices that have shaped the Western attitudes towards nature.

In the light of a conceptualization of nature that made the material world progressively lose its divine quality and moral value, in view of radical practices such as forcing natural things into passive objecthood and allowing therefore for an unparalleled appropriation and exploitation of natural resources, leading to unseen species extinctions, ecosystem malfunction, climate change and the global crisis of biodiversity – in light of this reality it is indeed understandable to look for alternatives.

But alternatives to what exactly? According to Lance E. Nelson and Rosemary Radford Ruether we find at the heart of the Western mindset a *transcendental dualism*, a dualism that elevates spirit above matter: “This leads to the all too familiar hierarchical placement of spirit, usually co-opted as the special province of a male elite, over a nature identified with birth, death, and the feminine. The essential spiritual task is then defined as a quest for autonomy from the restrictions of nature.”<sup>13)</sup>

With this diagnosis in mind Nelson examines a variety of approaches to the non-dual Vedānta that are trying to display it as an antidote for the dualistic structures embedded in Western thinking about nature. It is not necessary to reconstruct these positions here. They rely mostly on a rather naïve “unitive view”. According to this view the non-dual doctrine of Advaita Vedānta, i.e. that the true Self of all living things is one with *brahman*, and therefore all apparently separate beings are actually emanations of this one absolute consciousness provides “the philosophical basis for the Hindu's veneration of the natural world.”<sup>14)</sup>

This view, that has as such no basis in classical Advaita Vedānta, is more often than not a blend of a late Neo-Advaita tradition that mixes tantric, shivaistic versions of non-dualism and the mahāyāna buddhist equation of *samsāra and nirvāṇa*.<sup>15)</sup> Contrary to this view Nelson is eager to show, that the Vedānta of Śaṅkara and his followers not only fails to provide a philosophical basis but is actually bound to “carry the potential to

seriously undermine environmental concern”.<sup>16)</sup> It is meant to do so by promoting a rigid devaluation of nature.

There are two quite obvious ways to support his claim. The first one is to focus on Śaṅkaras Vedānta as a proponent of a radical South Asian ascetism. And it is indeed easy to find hard evidence for the claim that a practicing Advaitin is supposed to be a “celibate world-renouncer” who is terrified of the desert of cyclic time and the neverending rhythm of life and death. In order to be released from the bondage of *samsāra*, one has to cultivate a degree of non-attachment to the world of names and forms, of change and multiplicity that resembles – as a famous saying goes – the “indifference one has towards the excrements of a cow” or “the milk-porridge vomited by a dog.”

The passages in the writings of Gauḍapāda, Śaṅkara, Sureśvara and Padmapāda that display this polemic attitude of a radical ascetism are indeed legion. As are crass, outright hostile devaluations of the phenomenal world. Within his socio-cultural approach, being “concerned (...) with the effect that the Advaita tradition as a whole has had on the collective mind of South Asia”<sup>17)</sup> Nelson is right to pour cold water on the overheated attempts to replace a transcendental dualism by an emphatic version of non-dualism. This approach has a philosophical price to pay, though. As Nelson explicitly admits the issue of the “cultural and ecological influence of Advaita Vedānta” is not concerned with “hermeneutical subtlety”. One simply calms oneself down with the identification of an overall tendencie throughout the history of Advaita Vedānta.

A slightly more subtle way to support the claim that the Advaita Tradition leads to alienation from, and therefor to disdain for the natural world is nevertheless at hand. It looks at the conception of nature itself and the metaphysical architecture it is embedded in.

In this respect we might distinguish between nature *as* the phenomenal world, the cosmos of change and multiplicity – which Śaṅkara refers to as *jagat*, or *nāmarūpa* and the intrinsic nature *of* the phenomenal world, i.e. its essence or its substratum, *svabhāva*, which is called *brahman*. We are already familiar with the traditional status of these two notions: *brahma satyaṃ jagan mithyā* (VC, § 20). Brahman is real, the world is false.

According to a quite common interpretation, Advaita Vedānta displays a radical acosmic and monistic ontology, that not only considers a universal consciousness, *brahman*, as the sole basis for all reality, but who renders this mundane reality to be mere illusion. As soon as the nature of nature is revealed, nature itself is grasped as an illusionary appearance, *māyā*.

The monistic ontology of an ultimate non-dual substance is obviously

confronted with the difficult task of acknowledging the world of everyday experience and the changing life of its inhabitants. The traditional solution to declare the phenomenal world a mirage thus seems to settle into an illusionism that is bound to a new dualism between the natural world and the supreme reality beyond it. Together with the ascetic tendencies and the general world-weariness of medieval India we are easily lead to assume an acosmic ontology and with it an implicit metaphysical devaluation of nature.

This narrative can lead one to the conclusion that it would be futile to look for conceptual resources for environmental ethics in Advaita Vedānta – and I would agree, though not because it has nothing to offer, rather because it shows what conceptions of nature such ethical attempts do entertain.

Nature may be considered to be the environment *around us*, but even then, it is taken to be an object *for us* and nevertheless we want to find ways to express a relationship that does not lead to exploitation but cooperation and saving. Looking for conceptual resources for an environmental ethics presupposes the same deep rooted anthropocentric dualism of man and nature, that makes these attempts so urgent in the first place. In order to show that it is this dualism that may be at stake one should inspect the philosophy of the classical Advaita Vedānta more precisely. For this purpose, I am afraid, we cannot refrain from a number of hermeneutical subtleties.

### 3. *I Am of the nature of seeing* – Śaṅkara's methodical Disappointment

In the first instance we have to acknowledge that the aforementioned illusionism which depends on the Western, often pejorative translation of *māyāvāda* assumes an exclusively ontological orientation in Śaṅkara's writings. This can only be explained by a quite selective reading of the available sources.

In Śaṅkara's Vedānta the idea is central that human consciousness, due to ignorance (*avidyā*), can, and indeed naturally must set out and predominantly keep up a deceptive grasp of itself and of the world in which it appears to unfold separately. In ontological terms, this corresponds indeed to the question as to how *brahman* relates to the world of phenomenal appearance (Abstand. *jagat*) or to the sphere of 'names and forms' (*nāmarūpa*); a question that allows for a traditional and imprecise answer in terms of *māyā*. But this term *māyā* rarely occurs in the writings of Śaṅkara.<sup>18)</sup> A theory of a great illusion is not one of their major subjects. Śaṅkara is foremost concerned with the development of such distinctions

whose recognition and acknowledgement results in an overall dissolution of illusions.

It is striking how exceptionally little Śaṅkara has to say about *māyā*. He considers attempts to clarify *māyā* and the relationship of *brahman* to the world of appearances in philosophical categories to be basically futile and unsatisfactory. They are futile not only just because *māyā* is inaccessible to any kind of description (*anirvacanīya*) (Cf.VC, § 109) but because no Advaitin ever stated that the world is unreal (*asat*), but false (*mithyā*) and rather indeterminable (*anirvacaniyakhyat*).<sup>19)</sup> They are unsatisfactory because the purpose of the Vedānta-tradition is *brahmajñāna* – the knowledge and realization of *brahman*. Since by definition *brahman* is without attributes (*nirguṇa*)<sup>20)</sup>, free from objects, adjuncts, devoid of all differences of space and time it can only be characterised in the horizon of a negative theology. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad*, therefore, knows only one appropriate designation (*ādeśa*) for *brahman*: The famous *neti neti* (*Not this, Not this*).<sup>21)</sup>

In his commentary on this passage and in the corresponding discussion in his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, Śaṅkara gives this expression not only a referential but also a methodological meaning<sup>22)</sup>. And here the deeper philosophical problem of the non-dual doctrine of Vedānta becomes apparent: *ayamātmā brahma* – the *ātman* is *brahman*.<sup>23)</sup>

The motivation for this methodical turn of phrase is Śaṅkara's explicit intention to understand the Upaniṣads as texts in which the identity, or rather non-difference (*ananyatvam, abheda*), of *ātman* and *brahman* becomes realisable through teaching and example. Thus the expression *neti neti* refers not only to *brahman* but to the Self itself.<sup>24)</sup> Brahman is in general only attain through selfknowledge.<sup>25)</sup>

As an expression of a negative theology of the absolute *brahman*, the *neti neti* is sufficient in its referential function, insofar as it takes into account the fact that *brahman* cannot have determinations “as name, or form, or action, or heterogeneity, or species, or qualities.”<sup>26)</sup>

But if one is to recognise that the Self is nothing but *brahman*, the problem of reference takes on a performative meaning. The *neti neti* of negative theology characterises *brahman* as the indeterminable other that, being absolutely transcendent, must remain unavailable. This changes within the framework of a conception of the absolute in which transcendence and immanence become indistinguishable. The pull of *via negativa* is now not only an expression of the unavailability of a transcendent object, but also a reference to an equivalent unavailability of the subject. The subject is no longer satisfactorily referred to with the

indication of a negative designation. The *ex negativo* approach to a transcendental object may motivate the anticipation of a void that is bridged by a negative designation. But a corresponding effort in the horizon of living subjectivity gives rise to a tension that motivates the anticipation of a transformation.

The *neti neti* is relevant to Śāṅkara not only as regards the absolute, but as a method of negation of the deceptive superimpositions of the Self – the so-called *upādhis*. Under the spell of *avidya*, *ātman* is naturally overlaid with superimpositions of a cognitive, volitional and emotional nature. A state that is the constant guarantor of the familiar self-understanding of being an enjoying, acting and recognising entity that is able to objectify itself and the world around it – in this state we are what the Advaitins call a *jīva*, a living being. The self-experience of the *ātman* accordingly demands a progressive reduction (*neti neti*, ‘not this, not this’) of these superimpositions. The aim of this effort is the insight that the Self is already the non-objectifiable self-luminous witness (*sākṣin*) of fleeting and impermanent life.

But how, Śāṅkara asks, is it possible that on the *ātman*, which itself is not an object there should be something superimposed. Every superimposition presupposes an object it is superimposed on.<sup>27)</sup> And Śāṅkara hardly misses an opportunity to emphasise that the Self is characterised precisely by being a non-object (*aviśaya*). In the introduction to his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* Śāṅkara gives an answer that, with Mohanty, could be considered “most enigmatic”<sup>28)</sup>. The *ātman* “is not [...] non-object in the absolute sense. For it is the object of the notion of Ego (*asmat-pratyaya*), and the *ātman* is well known to exist on account of its immediate presentation.”<sup>29)</sup>

Everyone is familiar with himself as the object of the conception of the ego (*asmat-pratyaya-viśyaya*), whatever I refer to with the term “I”. But this is possible only under the presumption that I am already familiar with what it is the “I” refers to.<sup>30)</sup>

The difficulty is not merely that a contradiction arises when what is supposed to be a non-object (*aviśaya*) is defined as an object (*viśaya*), but that in this passage the *ātman* is supposed to be the object of an intimate cognitive reference conceptualised as “I”, but it is the *ātman* as the eternal witness that is precisely defined as that to which everything, even the sense of self, is an object. Here, then, the problem of self-reflection may be addressed. Namely in the form of the transcendental problem that I am the condition of the possibility of any objectification and that I cannot myself objectively recognise what I must presuppose in order to be able to

recognise an object at all. It is this Kantian inconvenience that lies at the heart of Śaṅkara's notion of *avidyā* – and accordingly *māyā*. But in contrast with the Kantian problem, what is at stake here is not a general formal subject or one object among others, but I myself.

The emphasis on an acosmic illusionism is thus not only a convenient way to solve an ontological problem or to take into account the conceptual requirements of the orthodox tradition. It opens up for a deep structural although almost trivial problem: *There are insights for which a change in perspective is indispensable*. This requirement, however, is not to be confused with the rather problematic one, that an outstanding spiritual experience is needed in order to acquire the insights of nondual philosophies by some form of non-conceptual intuition. This irrationalism would be misplaced. It simply mirrors the fact that a philosophy that has a radical notion of self-knowledge at its heart and is employing the idea of a deeply rooted misconception about Self and nature has to be concerned with means of Disillusionment – and as we will finally see, with Disappointment as well. The attempts to discredit Śaṅkara's Vedānta as an acosmic ontology often fail to acknowledge the existential tension his philosophy indeed provides.

The same holds for the so-called monistic tendency. The popular characterization of this ontology as some kind of monism that regards *brahman* as an absolute substance falls short. The negative element within the label *a-dvaita* (non-dual) can be turned into the affirmative position of monistic philosophy only at the expense of philosophical imprecision. An ontological monism too quickly disposes of the difficulty that it cannot acknowledge that my own'self is deprived of true ontological representation. *Because it would be I who must accomplish this monism first*.

Śaṅkara is well aware of this difficulty: he gives here the story of the perplexity of a child. After a successful river crossing a child is asked to confirm the presence of the ten attendees. And so, he starts counting. In doing so the child always ends up with a sobering nine. Only the hint of the master: "My boy, you are the tenth" reveals to the child the so obvious confusion.<sup>31)</sup> In the same sense, an ontological monist may murmur slightly embarrassedly about an all-encompassing Oneness until someone tells him, "But You are the One who is present now."

In this respect, the term *advaita* is to be recognized as evidence of phenomenological probity. It considers that theoretical representation begins in a state of duality and requires execution to enter a monism – whose metaphysical principle is not 'unity' (*ekatva*) but 'non-duality'

(*a-dvaya*). The space of negation, which is spanned by the *alpha privativum*, is a working space.

And within this space Śāṅkara confronts us again and again with an unsolvable task: Become yourself!

It is insoluble because, on the one hand, this task should be the result of a singular highly charged spiritual effort, on the other hand that what must be realised is already most fundamentally familiar (*prasiddha*, vgl. Brahmasūtrabhāṣya, I.1.2, 32). As he makes clear in his commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad*: “The attainment of the *ātman* cannot be, as in the case of things other than It, the obtaining of something not obtained before, for here there is no difference between the person attaining and the object attained.”<sup>32)</sup>

As soon as you try to avoid the tension that arises when it dawns on you, that what you are *looking for* is actually *where you are looking from* and you are trying instead to get a hold on the hypostasis of *brahman* you are thrown right back on yourself. Because the only positive definition of *brahman* that Śāṅkara ever offers defines *brahman* as a self-luminous witness and transcendental condition of all apprehension.<sup>33)</sup>

What will arise at this level of enquiry is a *reflection-reflex*. We are naturally inclined to objectifying ourself in a process of reflection, knowing us in the world as the object of the “I”. Confronted with the notion of an ever present witness closer to us than we are ourselves, we will naturally try to find this witness, making it an object of consciousness. So, like the structure of the reciprocal superimposition of Ego and Self we are again forced to go round in circles, attentively tumble between the object of the I and the self-luminous field of consciousness, that we always have to make use of in order to get hold of ourselves.

Here Śāṅkara merely suggests to look more closely at that tipping point we experience as I-ness – “the true I is the witness of the I” (*ahampadārthas tv ahamādisākṣi*).<sup>34)</sup>

But this witness is not an intimate homunculus – his nature is pure seeing.<sup>35)</sup>

“Such being the case”, Śāṅkara says in his *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣadbhāṣya*, “the vision itself is its nature (*svabhāva*), like the heat of fire, and there is no other conscious (or unconscious) seer over and above the vision [...]”.<sup>36)</sup>

When looking for the witness there is indeed nothing to grasp. But the inevitable pull of the reflection-reflex to try it anyway is of utmost importance: Because it is the manifestation of the impossibility to objectify the witness of all apprehension. As such it is a decisive part of its

recognition.

For it sensitizes us to the fact that the power of consciousness that tries to get hold of the supposedly enigmatic witness is precisely the power that prevents the recognition of his unfragmented presence.<sup>37)</sup>

The metaphor of the witness proves to be itself a soteriological tipping-point. The hypostasis of the Self as “witness” motivates precisely the movement of reflective confrontation. And it is only within the constant failure of reflection the silent witness can become self-revealing.<sup>38)</sup>

Śaṅkara thus brilliantly draws upon the hypostasis of a self-nature of *ātman*. He does so in order to keep up the pressor in the kettle of transformation. He lures us into the merry-go-round of self-reflection in the hope we get so sick of our ride, that the tention of the reflection-reflex collapses.

The motiv to join this ride in the first place is of course the anticipation of *mokṣa*, liberation from suffering and the promise of a stainless, if not pure state beyond the swamp of human existence. But even for this prospect, as the infamous *Upadeśasāhasrī* shows, Śaṅkara is sobering up the final goal of the *Jīvanmukta*: “Though I have the highest *Ātman* as my true nature and am nondual, i am nevertheless covered with wrong knowledge, which is nescience.”<sup>39)</sup>

The best a non-dual philosophy has to offer might be a genuine disappointment. There may be no conclusive grand narrative in the end, no coherent ontological architecture nor theoretical unburdening of our ethical dilemmas, and there may be no enlightenment waiting anywhere. However, the heartfelt engagement with a disappointment of this scale offers something way better, something every ethics is eager to expose: a chance for human maturity.

#### Reference

- 1) Gerald J. Larson (1987). ‘Conceptual resources’ in South Asia for ‘environmental ethics’ or the fly is still alive and well in the bottle. *Philosophy East and West*, 37(2), 150–159.
- 2) For this dualism it does not matter if we interpret this central phrase as a permission for dominion over nature or as a command for stewardship.
- 3) See: Richard King (1995). *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism. The Mahāyāna Context of the Gauḍapādīya-Kārikā*. New York.
- 4) Ibid., 90. “That should be known as nature which is permanently established, intrinsic, innate, not produced, [and] that which does not abandon its own nature.” - *sāmsiddhikī svābhāvikī saḥajā akṛtā ca yā | prakṛtiḥ seti vijñeyā svabhāvaṃ na jahāti yā*.
- 5) In Sanskrit *ātman* has a primarily self-referential meaning: ‘oneself, itself’. Probably not least the central position of this expression in the Upaniṣads and the Vedānta that followed them has led to a substantive translation of the reflexive pronoun ‘self’. One problem with the translation as “the Self” is already that Sanskrit, even if a demonstrative character can be expressed through emphasis, is in principle an articleless language. In the absence of attractive alternatives, however, I will follow the translation with “Self”, leaving the



- expression *ātman* untranslated where it is possible without damage to the style. See also: Robert Lehmann *Stiller Zeuge – Bewegtes Leben. Selbstbewusstsein in Phänomenologie und Advaita-Vedānta*. Freiburg i.Br. 2019, 314–317, 331–337.
- 6) Gerald J. Larson (2017). *Classical Sāṃkhya. An Interpretation of its History and Meaning*. Dehli, 167.
  - 7) *Ibid.*, 179–190.
  - 8) *Ibid.*, 160–167.
  - 9) *Vivekachudamani* § 20, in: Chaitanya, P. Acharya (2012). *Vivekachudamani*. Devanagari Text & Translation. Revised and Edited, with an Introduction & Notes by Satinder Dhiman. Dehli.
  - 10) “For this apparent world, whose existence is guaranteed by all the means of knowledge, cannot be denied, unless some one should find out some new truth [...] – for a general principle is proved by the absence of contrary instances.” Brahmasūtrabhāṣya, II.2.31, 427 in: Gambhīrānanda (1983): *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya*. Calcutta.
  - 11) Meera Baindur (2015). *Nature in Indian Philosophy and Cultural Traditions*. Springer, 85.
  - 12) Lance E. Nelson (1998). *The dualism of nondualism: Advaita Vedānta and the irrelevance of nature*. In: Purifying the earthly body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India, ed. Lance E. Nelson, 61–88. Albany, 61.
  - 13) *Ibid.*
  - 14) *Ibid.*, 63.
  - 15) *Ibid.* See further: Paul Hacker (1995). *Schopenhauer and Hindu Ethics*. In: Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedānta. Ed. and transl. by Wilhelm Halbfass, Albany, 273–318.
  - 16) Nelson (1998), 62.
  - 17) Nelson (1998), 84 fnt. 38.
  - 18) Hacker shows that “*nāmarūpa*” is Śaṅkara’s primary expression. See Paul Hacker (1978). *Eigentümlichkeiten der Lehre und Terminologie Sarikaras: Avidyā, Nāmarāpa, Māyā, Isvara*. In: Paul Hacker und Lambert Schmithausen (Hg.). *Kleine Schriften*. Wiesbaden, 69–110.
  - 19) And even in the rare cases, where Śaṅkara defines ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ he does so not in an ontological horizon but in epistemological terms: “That awareness (*buddhi*) which does not vary with its objects is real (*sat*), that which does vary with its objects is unreal (*asat*).” *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* 2.16. in: Alladi Mahadeva Sastry (1981). *The Bhagavad Gita. With the commentary of Sri Sankaracharya*. Madras.
  - 20) I will not discuss *saguṇa brahman* as the deliberate objectification of the absolute for the purpose of teaching and worship here.
  - 21) *Brhadāranyaka-Upaniṣad* II.3.6. in: Madhavananda (1997). *Brhadāranyaka-Upaniṣad*. With the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya, Calcutta.
  - 22) *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* III.2.22.
  - 23) *Brhadāranyaka-Upaniṣad* IV.4.5.
  - 24) “Because the disciple, thus instructed, knows himself to be *brahman*, thoroughly understands the meaning of the scriptures, and fears nothing; if, on the other hand, the individual self is one, and what is described as ‘not this, not that’ is something else, then the disciple would understand the reverse truth, namely, that Brahman is something, and that he is something else.” (*Brhadāranyaka-Upaniṣadbhāṣya*, 237 f.)
  - 25) See Śaṅkara’s collection of quotations in the introduction to BĀU, II.IV.: »The Self alone isto be meditated upon« (I.IV.7); »of all these, this Self alone should be realised« (ibid), for »It is dearer than a son« etc. (I.IV.8). In the course of explanation of the above passage already introduced, the aim of knowledge and its realisation to that aim have been stated in the sentence, »It knew only Itself as, »I am Braham.« Therefore It became.« (I.IV.10). Thus it has been mentioned that the inner Self is the domain of knowledge.« (*Brhadāranyaka-Upaniṣadbhāṣya*, 241)
  - 26) *Brhadāranyaka-Upaniṣadbhāṣya*, 239.

- 27) And not only that, in ontological terms Daya Krishna is quite right to point out, that the notion of superimposition itself requires an acknowledgement of the reality of the things superimposed on the *ātman* and hence a dualist ontology. See Daya Krishna (1994). *Adyasa - A Non-Advaitic Beginning in Sankara Vedānta*, in: Indian Philosophy: A counter-Perspective. Dehli, 156–163.
- 28) J.N. Mohanty (1993), *Essays on Indian philosophy traditional and modern*. Delhi/New York, 68.
- 29) *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, I,1. 5.
- 30) For the problem of prereflective consciousness in this context see: Lehmann (2019), 403–409.
- 31) See: *Upadeśasāhasrī*, I.xviii.190. In: Sengaku M. (1992). *A thousand teachings. The Upadeśasāhasrī of Śankara*. Albany, 192.
- 32) *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣadbhāṣya* I.4.7, 78.
- 33) “If that highest Brahman which is different from the world that is negated [...] really exists, why then is it not apprehended? – Because [...] it is unevolved, not to be apprehended by the senses (or other means); for it is the witness of whatever is apprehended (i.e. the subject in all apprehension).” *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* III, 2.24, 171.
- 34) *Vivekachudamani*, § 294.
- 35) See: *Upadeśasāhasrī* I., 10.2, 123.
- 36) *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣadbhāṣya*, I.iv.10, 109.
- 37) “He who knows that the vision of the seer is eternal, does not wish to see it in any other way. This wish to see the seer automatically stops because of its very impossibility.” *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣadbhāṣya*, I.iv.10, 109.
- 38) See for this Lehmann (2019), 409–426.
- 39) *Upadeśasāhasrī*, I.10.8.