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A Philosophical Inquiry into Epistemology and Metaphysics in Advaita Vedanta

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Abstract

The well-known Hindu philosophical system Advaita Vedanta has a unique viewpoint on the nature of knowledge and reality. Within the field of philosophy, epistemology studies the nature, origins, forms, sources, techniques, and applicability of knowledge. Indian philosophical systems all have unique epistemologies that are intimately connected to their respective metaphysics. Another major area of philosophy is metaphysics, which addresses issues such as what constitutes reality, whether it is material or spiritual, if the world is real or not, what makes it up, and whether it is singular, dual, or plural. Whereas epistemology elucidates how we might know something, metaphysics establishes what is real. Vedanta's epistemology is founded on its metaphysical conceptions of reality. In short, epistemology is a tool for understanding metaphysical reality; In light of this, this article explores the epistemological and metaphysical aspects of Advaita Vedanta, elucidating its perspectives on perception, inference, testimony, and the illusory nature of reality (Maya). It also highlights the relationship between epistemology and metaphysics in Vedanta, with a particular focus on Advaita Vedanta.

Keywords: Epistemology, Metaphysics, Advaita Vedanta, Brahma, Maya, Reality, Atman

Introduction

Indian philosophy has six traditional schools; Vedanta is one among them. It is known as Jnana Mimamsa or Uttar Mimamsa. The term "Vedanta" literally translates as "the end, conclusion, or

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highest culmination of Vedic thought.” Everything revolves around three concepts: Jag (the world/Samsara), Jivan (the human life/Atman), and Jagdish (God/Brahman). We are all seeking to understand the Ultimate Reality that underpins the universe, but philosophers, spiritualists, and religious people especially so. One type of tool that helps us understand, see or come to terms with Ultimate Reality is Vedanta. Vedanta’s topic content is primarily philosophical. This paper focuses on the Non-Dualistic Philosophy of Vedanta, one of the five primary schools of Vedanta in Indian philosophy. Professor of Buddhist and Asian Studies Richard King claims that the word Advaita first appears in the Mandukya Upanishad’s prose in a Vedantic context. (King, 1995) Advaita Vedanta non-dualism is sometimes considered idealist monism. According to King, the non-dualistic themes present in the Upanishads were fully developed and taken to their most radical conclusion in the Advaita Vedanta tradition.

In contrast, Milne (Milne,1997) argues that labelling Advaita Vedanta as strictly “monistic” can be misleading, as it tends to confuse the “negation of difference” with the “assertion of oneness.” He emphasizes that the term *Advaita* (literally, “not-two”) points to the denial of duality, such as the distinction between subject and object or between knower and known, rather than a simplistic claim that all is one. Sankara is often attributed to the founding of the Advaita tradition, but he was preceded by his teacher, Govinda, who is said to be taught by Gaudapada. Sankara set a strong emphasis on non-dualism (Advaita), which should not be confused with monism. The Advaita Vedanta developed the prevailing monism of the Upanishads to its ultimate extreme. Commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads, and Brahma sutras are among his compositions. (Grimes, 1990) Establishing Brahman’s absolute actuality by transcending the appearance of the universe is the central idea of Advaita.

The non-dualist school of Hindu philosophy known as Advaita Vedanta investigates the nature of consciousness, reality, and the self. It is among the most significant philosophical schools in India and has had a significant influence on Indian spirituality and culture. The core of Advaita Vedanta is the concept of non-duality or Advaita, which holds that everything else is an illusion (Maya) and that Brahman is the sole ultimate reality. Advaita Vedanta holds that Brahman and the particular ego (atman) are the same. It is said that the individual self is everlasting, unchanging, and identical to Brahman. Advaita Vedanta teaches that realizing one’s unity with Brahman is the path to achieving moksha, or freedom from the cycle of birth and death (samsara). The Advaita Vedantic tradition regards Sri Sankaracarya as its greatest master. He was the first to codify and enhance the Advaita school of thought. In his *Brahma jnana Valimala*, Sri Sankara (Aggarwal, 2023) outlines the fundamental beliefs of Advaita Vedanta as follows: Brahman is Reality; Brahma Satyam Jagan mithya Jivo brahmaiva naprah. The world is not real. It is true that the embodied soul is Brahman and is not fundamentally distinct from it.

The universe is unreal (mithya) and lacks intrinsic reality, and the world’s names and forms (nama-rupa) are attributed to primordial ignorance (mulajnana). Gaudapada, the grand teacher of

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Sankara, held that Brahman is the only reality *asti bhati priyam rupam nama chetyamsapanchakam adyatrayam brahmarupam jagadrupam tato dvayam* (Swami, 2005). Eternal Existence, Consciousness, and Bliss are all embodied in Brahman, with the characteristics of Existence and Consciousness that are most understandable to ordinary people. However, its blissful side is hidden in the absence of the mental state about Brahman (*brahmajnana*).

Sankara and Gaudapada are well-known Advaita Vedanta philosophers. While Gaudapada only examines Advaita metaphysics, Shankara examines metaphysics as well as epistemology. Like the Bhatta Mimamsakas, Advaitas maintain that *pramana*, or the means of knowing, in the empirical state is the basis for *prameya*, or the object of knowledge. They suggest that consciousness manifests in four ways as a result of ignorance (*nescience*): *pramiticaitanya* (cognition's consciousness or *phalacaitanya*), *pramatracaitanya* (cognizing consciousness), *prameyacaitanya* (consciousness of the object), and *pramanacaitanya* (source of cognition). While *antahkaranavrtti* (mental mode), or *prana*, is seen as *prama* in a metaphorical sense, *pranicaitanya* is regarded as actual *prama* (Javanesegraviton, 1958)

Metaphysics in Advaita Vedanta:

Metaphysics is the field of philosophy that addresses the nature of existence and its underlying principles. According to Advaita Vedanta, Brahman the origin of all existence, is the ultimate reality. It exists outside of space, time, and causality. There are further descriptions of Brahman as limitless, eternal, and unchanging. Brahman, the self of all beings, is identified as pure intelligence, pure being, and pure blessedness, according to Sankara. The true essence of pure blessedness is partially realized in dreamless sleep, but in ordinary waking life, people associate themselves with illusionary conceptions. The individual self is only an appearance; the true self is universal, full of blessedness, pure wisdom, and being. Brahman is the ultimate reality; it is indescribable, imperceptible, and beyond all categories and experiences. He goes on to explain that the world of phenomena is the domain of *Maya*, a result of ignorance caused by our tendency to give the unitary, which is incapable of being subtle, nameless, formless reality (Brahman), names, and forms. The world of appearance is neither non-being nor unreality; rather, it is subtle by reality, Brahman. (Deutsch, 1969) Advaita holds that Brahman is the source and origin of all transformations. It is believed that Brahman is the efficient and material cause of everything in the universe. According to *Brahma Sutras I.1.2*, Brahman is that which is the source of this universe's creation, continuation, and dissolution. (Gambhirananda, 2021 [1965])

World: Humans, in their ignorance of Brahman, mistakenly perceive the ever-changing world of appearance as reality, much like a person walking on a rope in the dark who incorrectly sees it as a snake due to ignorance (*avidya*). The snake can be sublated but not completely dismissed as entirely unreal; therefore, it is neither fully real nor entirely unreal. Similarly, the universe is merely an appearance of Brahman; there are not two distinct realities only Brahman exists, which manifests as the empirical world, with names and forms superimposed upon it.

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Atman: Atman is formless and nameless, much like Brahman. It represents a pure and simple mind. While we see it as limited, it is endless and eternal. Sankara explains that Atman and Brahman are the same, which is a key idea in the Upaniṣads. In Vedanta, the connection between Atman, or the individual self, and Brahman, or ultimate reality, is important. Understanding Atman helps us understand everything because Atman is Brahman, and everything is part of Brahman. All things in the world come from Brahman, who is its cause and source. When all souls unite with the ultimate truth, they lose their individual identities, similar to how different flower juices combine to create honey and lose their uniqueness. Ram-Prasad describes “Atma” as not being an object but as “the complex essence of being subjectivity, rather than an objective self with the quality of consciousness” (Ram-Prasad, 2013). Advaita philosophy states that there are three states of consciousness: waking (jagrat), dreaming (Svapna), and deep sleep (susupti) (Sharma, 2004; Wilber, 2000).

Sri Sankaracharya recommended the Path of Knowledge for the realization of Oneness. He placed great emphasis on realizing and comprehending Brahman, also known as Atman, the ultimate Reality. The epistemology of Advaita is in line with its philosophical stance. Sankara cites an Upanishad text to explain the epistemological correlation of the ontological divide between Brahman and the world. “There are two kinds of knowledge (vidya) to be attained: the higher (para) and the lower (apara)”. (Sastri, 1905).

There are two types of knowledge: the higher, absolute knowledge known as pramārthika-Satya and the lower, conventional, practical, relative knowledge called vyavaharika Satya) While lower knowledge is concerned with the created world or phenomenal appearance, higher knowledge is concerned with reality. These two kinds of knowledge correlate to various levels of reality, according to Advaitic analysis. Lower knowledge involves the knower (pramata), the object of knowing (prameya), and the instrument of knowledge (pramana). It is a component of the causal order with moral repercussions (Karman). Higher knowledge, on the other hand, transcends the duality of subject and object in lower knowledge, karmic consequences, and transmigratory life (samsara).

Epistemology

Pramana, which means “means of knowledge” in classical Indian thinking, addresses issues such as how accurate information may be obtained, how one knows and how one does not, and the extent to which knowledge relevant to someone or something can be obtained. (Potter, 2002) The area of philosophy known as epistemology examines what knowledge is, what it is made of, and how we come by it. Knowledge is viewed in Advaita Vedanta as the means of achieving moksha, or freedom from the cycle of birth and death (samsara). Realizing one’s actual essence as Brahman, the source of all creation, is the ultimate purpose of human life, according to Advaita Vedanta. Sankara asserts that there are three main ways to obtain knowledge (pramāṇa). Pratyakṣa (perception), Anumana (inference) and Sabda (testimony/word of reliable experts) are what allow

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us to acquire actual knowledge. According to Vedanta, six pramanas are legitimate sources of knowledge. These include perception (pratyaksa), inference (anumana), comparison (upamana), presumption (arthapatti), non-apprehension (anupalabdhi), and verbal testimony (sruti, sabda, or agama). Advaita Vedanta recognizes the six pramaṇas (sources and criteria of valid knowledge) in the light of the Kumarila school of Mimamsa and generally agrees with it in matters of detail also. (Compare the saying: vyavāhare Bhāṭṭa-nayaḥ; quoted from (Hiriyanna, 1993). These are perception (pratyakṣa), inference (anumana), testimony (sabda), comparison (upamana), postulation (arthapatti) and non-cognition (anupalabdhi). (It may be noted that while Sankara refers only to the three pramaṇas: Pratyaksa (perception), Anumana (inference), Sabda (testimony/word of reliable experts). Later thinkers of the Advaita school accepted all six. At the Vedanta-Sutras of Badarayana with the commentary by Sankara. (Thibaut, 1970)

Perception:(pratyaksa)

Since perception gives one immediate access to reality, it is regarded as the primary source of reliable knowledge. Prabhakara highlights the fact that perception understands an object's form. Advaita Vedanta holds that perception only understands pure existence (sanmatra), which is without any particular or universal qualities attributable to discursive thought. It is underlined that indeterminate perception is the authentic type of perception, truly reflecting reality. The interaction of the senses with objects is the primary aspect of perception; the existence of the self and its relationship to the mind are secondary factors.

Inference :(anumana)

Certainty, or inferential knowledge, is believed to originate from inference (anumana). Knowing (mana) via inference comes after knowing (anu). It is information obtained by means of another piece of knowledge. The basis for inference is the understanding that the middle term and the major phrase always occur together. A fire is understood to always accompany the middle phrase, smoke. A fire is present anywhere there is smoke. We refer to this as vyapti. It is the major term's invasion of the middle term. when a hill appears to be smoking, but I don't see a fire there. Then I recall the vyapti that states there is a fire anywhere there is smoke. Next, based on what I could see of smoke, I conclude that there is a fire in the hill. The process of learning about a thing that is not visible to the senses through inference (anumana) is based on the observation of another object and the recall of a consistent relationship between the observed and inferred objects. Understanding invariable concomitance, or vyapti, is crucial for drawing conclusions. The two kinds of inference are self-inference (svarthanumana) and other-inference (pararthanumana). The former is produced by remembering the vyapti while perceiving the sign. The latter is a syllogism with three members. The three members (propositions) of pararthanumana are pratijna (proposition), Reason (hetu), udaharana (statement of the vyapti with an example), Application (upanaya) and nigamana (conclusion).

Testimony (sabda):

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Sabda pramana is called agama-pramana by the Vedantins. As we have already mentioned, the Advaita Vedanta considers witness to be a very essential source of knowledge. The Advaitin acknowledges it as a reliable source of information on its own. If no other source of information contradicts the relationship that the sentence implies, it is considered valid. The Vedas convey God's thoughts and are of superhuman (apauruseya) origin. Although the Vedas (vedartha) hold eternal value, the books themselves are not, as isvara repeats them throughout each era of the world. Even while akasa and other elements emerge and fall out, the Advaitin acknowledges that the Vedas are a collection of letters, words, and sentences that exist at the moment of creation and end with the universal dissolution of everything. The Vedas are considered to have the highest pramanyam (validity) and to embody timeless truths. The Mimamsa School, like the Vedanta, believes that the Vedas are eternal because even words have changed and have developed into complex, scientific systems of interpretation;

Comparison (upamana)

The method of determining how similar an object is to something it is not is through comparison. After hearing a forester say that "a wild cow" is like a cow, the individual visits a forest, recalls the forester's comment, and spots an animal that resembles a cow. Then he realizes it's a wild cow, the foreign creature. In this case, resemblance is learned by comparison (upamana).

Postulation (arthapatti)

The founder of Mimamsa Philosophy is Jamini. The Mimamsa school of Bhatta Kumarila Bhatta (c. 700 A.D.) established a school that acknowledges two additional reliable sources of information. Conjecture and Lack of Fear. A postulation is an assumption made to account for an unexplained fact; it is a form of sufficient hypothesis used to account for an event. Advaita Vedanta acknowledges the following six pramanas, just like Kumarila does: Prabhakara is the founder of Prabhakara school, which is a distinct Mimamsa school. He disapproves of non-apprehension as a legitimate source of knowledge on its own. Despite not being seen eating during the day, Devadatta is plump and healthy, which is an illustration of arthapatti in Indian reasoning. It follows that it is assumed he must be eating at night. By arthapatti, the knowledge that Devadatta eats at night has been acquired.

Non-apprehension (anupalabdhi):

One special Pramana, or source of knowledge, found in Advaita Vedanta is the idea of non-apprehension (anupalabdhi), which enables us to recognize the non-existence or non-presence of an object. It is not the same as the other pramanas that are shared with the Nyaya school, like perception, inference, and testimony. Since no sense organ is in contact with non-presence, non-apprehension an instantaneous realization that an object does not exist is not grasped by perception. This idea is a key component of Advaita Vedanta's epistemology and comes from Kumarila Bhatta's Mimamsa school. One can determine if a jar is present at a location by noting its absence. As seen by phrases like "there is no teacher in the classroom," "there is no sound here," "this

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flower has no fragrance,” and so on, we also frequently employ this form of knowledge. The idea that the absence of anything might lead to the realization of its non-existence (abhava/Absence) may appear counterintuitive at first.

The externally oriented information about the universe, sense organs, and scriptures is largely applicable to the six pramaṇas, or valid means of knowledge. Nevertheless, the ultimate aim of Vedānta, self-knowledge, cannot be directly attained by them. The self cannot be known by perception, inference, comparison, assumption, or non-apprehension because it is outside the range of the senses. Even spoken testimony, or *śabda*, does not immediately enlighten the seeker; it is only useful in indirect ways. Rather, to reveal the hidden implications of these teachings, the seeker must reflect on the words of guidance from a realized authority through the practices of *śravaṇa* (hearing the truth), *manana* (contemplating the truth), and *nidhidhyāsan* (living and breathing the truth). According to the Advaita tradition, one can attain correct knowledge in *jñānayoga* through three levels of practice: *śravaṇa* (listening), *manana* (thinking), and *nididhyāsana* (meditation). Correct knowledge overcomes *avidyā*, psychological and perceptual errors linked to *Ātman* and *Brahman*. (Mayeda, 1992) The principles outlined in chapter 4 of the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad* serve as the foundation for this three-step process. (K. Ramakrishna Rao, 2015)

Advaita Vedānta holds that the world we experience via our senses is an illusion (*māyā*) that our brains have created, not the ultimate reality. The cause of this delusion stems from our ignorance (*avidyā*) regarding our actual nature as *Brahman*. Overcoming this ignorance and realizing our actual essence as *Brahman* is the aim of Advaita Vedānta. Advaita Vedānta holds that direct realization (*anubhava*) of *Brahman* is the highest form of knowledge. Only spiritual practices (*sādhana*) like meditation, introspection, and contemplation can lead to this. One can become aware of their true nature as *Brahman* and transcend the confines of the mind by engaging in these techniques.

The ignorant believe the world to be real, but the knowledgeable recognize that God, the ultimate reality, lies beneath this false illusion. This idea can be explained by giving the example of a rope that seems like a snake in the dark and instills anxiety, but when light is revealed, it is clear that just the rope was seen. Similar to this, ignorance hides reality, therefore *Brahman* is the true foundation upon which the world is projected. Every appearance is like rubbing two pieces of wood together to make fire for a fire sacrifice; the rubbing causes flames to emanate that can burn through the wood itself.

In a same way, when subject and object unite, the one *ātma* that devours both subjects and objects emerges. Another way to understand this analogy is to use the example of a lamp and a lighter. Although a lamp may first be lighted with a lighter, over time the fire in the lamp may consume both the lighter and the lamp, leaving only fire as the single reality devoid of duality or plurality. Another illustration would be water-filled utensils on a beautiful afternoon. While gazing

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inside these utensils, one may observe numerous sun reflections, or “anya” but when looking straight up, just one sun, or “sama” is discernible.

There are two approaches to inquiry: the internally and externally-oriented approaches. An investigation technique may be inwardly or outside focused. In the first scenario, the subject, or enquirer, searches an externally existing object for what is genuine. In the latter scenario, the subject, or enquirer, examines themselves to discover who they truly are. Whereas the latter approach, which is unconditional and absolutist, aids in the realization of the Real, the former produces knowledge that is conditional and relative. The sole realities according to Vedanta are Atman or Brahman, which are spiritual or conscious rather than material or physical. As a result, other pramanas are useless because they are not knowable by external sense perception. (Chattopadhyaya, 2000)

Conclusion:

This study has explored how Advaita Vedanta offers a profound and cohesive synthesis of epistemology and metaphysics in the service of spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*). At the heart of its philosophy lies the ontological claim that Brahman is the only ultimate reality. At the same time, the empirical world (*jagat*) is a mere overlay, a projection of our ignorance. Sankara’s Advaita, far from being a mere speculative system, uses epistemology not to construct knowledge for its own sake but as a soteriological instrument, a means to realize the unity of *Atman* and *Brahman*.

Through a nuanced reinterpretation of the three principal *pramāṇas* perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), and testimony (*śabda*), Advaita Vedanta distinguishes between relative knowledge (*vyavaharika-satta*) and absolute knowledge (*paramarthika-satta*). While perception and inference operate meaningfully within the empirical world, it is *śabda*, mainly as found in the Upaniṣads, that guides the seeker toward non-dual realization.

The metaphysical insight that the world is neither entirely real nor unreal (*mithya*) is key to understanding Advaita’s subtle realism. The world is experientially valid but ontologically secondary. Atman, the individual self, is ultimately not separate from Brahman, and liberation is achieved through the internalization of this truth via *śravaṇa* (hearing), *manana* (reflection), and *nididhyāsana* (deep contemplation).

Furthermore, this exploration reveals that in Advaita, epistemology and metaphysics are mutually reinforcing. Knowledge (*jñāna*) can change our understanding by removing ignorance and revealing the true nature of being (*sat*). This shows how knowing and being rely on each other. *Jñāna* is not just a way to find truth; it helps transform us into truth itself. This allows the seeker to go beyond ignorance and gain deeper insights.

The ideas developed by Advaita Vedanta are still important today, especially in fields like consciousness studies, phenomenology, and comparative philosophy. It clearly explains different levels of reality and emphasizes the importance of direct experience (*anubhava*) over just thinking

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about concepts. This approach offers profound insights into the nature of self, illusion, and truth, which can stimulate the mind and capture interest.

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