

Sankara's Two-Level View of Truth: Nondualism on Trial

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Sankara (788-820 AD) was the principle ancient expositor of impersonalist Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, the nondualistic or monistic school. Since many in the West today, such as the prolific author Ken Wilber, advance this kind of metaphysics, a careful analysis of Sankara's ideas is pertinent. Sankara interpreted the sacred Scriptures as teaching that Brahman was the one supreme reality and that all that is, is Brahman. The supposedly ultimate Self (Atman) is really identical with the universal Self (Brahman). The world of duality, diversity, and individuality is fundamentally unreal or illusory (*maya*); only ignorance (*avidya*) allows us to grant it full reality

However, against the Buddhists, who denied the reality of external objects, Sankara argued that the world of *maya* is a world of subjects apprehending external objects. He argues:

The non-existence of external things cannot be maintained because we are conscious of external things. In every act of perception we are conscious of some external thing corresponding to the idea, whether it be a post or a wall or a piece of clothe or a jar, and that of which we are conscious cannot but exist.¹

How can a nondualist seriously utter such things? After all, Brahman alone is truly real—the sole Being. Sankara tries to reconcile his understanding of the objective world of individuated things perceived by individual beings with the final reality of nondualism by virtue of a two-level theory of truth. For the unenlightened the plural world seems to be the ultimate reality. But those who practice *jñana marga* (the way of knowledge) and attain a “cognition of the infinite” transcend this lower level to attain to spiritual release (*moksha*) by gaining knowledge (*vidya*) This two-level view can be explicated in four interrelated dimensions.²

1. Rationality (epistemology):
 - a. Ordinary: rational, discursive, conceptual
 - b. Absolute: intuitive, immediate, mystical knowledge or realization
2. Reality (metaphysics):
 - a. Empirical reality: phenomenally real objects
 - b. Absolute reality: non-dual, non-differentiated
3. Theology (metaphysics):
 - a. Saguna Brahman: qualified, duality (Personal Lord; Isvara; worship, hymnody)
 - b. Nirguna Brahman: unqualified, non-dual (“Not this, not that” (*neti, neti*); no relationship)
4. Morality:
 - a. Conventional: karmic level; ethical disjunctions
 - b. Non-dual: transcendence of ethical realm

The “A” level has only a provisional or relative reality while the “B” level is ultimate. Therefore, Deutsch comments:

The whole of perception and reason [the “A” levels above] is negated the moment there is a dawning of the truth of [Nirguna] Brahman [the “B” levels]. *If Brahman alone is real*, then clearly there cannot be another order of truth that subsists in some kind of finality. From the standpoint of Brahman, all other knowledge is *false*.³

Notice the qualifying phrase “from the standpoint of Brahman.” Sankara wants to argue that from the standpoint of the “A” level there are subject/object/consciousness relationships. However, they are not “ultimately real” or “finally true.” The great question then becomes, “What is the difference between the ‘ultimately real’ and the lesser versions of ‘reality’?”

Madhva (1197-1276) was a Hindu teacher who founded a school, called *Dvaita*, that intentionally opposed monism and non-dualism. He argued that Sankara’s levels-of-truth doctrine was incoherent. There is either a world of plural selves or there is not. You cannot have it both ways. Madhva appealed to the unity of truth and assumed the law of excluded middle. A declarative statement (one that expresses a proposition) is either true or false; not neither truth nor false and not both true and false. To claim that the statement “There are many selves” is true for one level but not true for another “ultimate” level just doesn’t make sense to Madhva. His critique is cogent because ontological claims either correctly describe states of affairs or they fail to do so. It is difficult to rank levels of truth when the higher level contradicts the lower level. Consider the following statements:

1. The Atlanta Braves lost the 1993 baseball playoffs in four games.
2. The Braves lost the 1993 baseball playoffs in six games.
3. The Braves didn’t make it to the 1993 baseball playoffs.

Only statement (2) is true because the Braves lost the playoffs in six games to the Philadelphia Phillies. Both statements (1) and (3) are false because they fail to describe the objective state of affairs accurately. Neither of the two false statements are “true” from any perspective. They are false. If someone believes either (1) or (3) to be true, he is in error. There is no question of “levels of truth” here in the sense Sankara wants

to defend. One might say that (1) is “closer to the truth” than three because the Braves were in the 1993 playoffs, even though they lost in six games instead of four. Nevertheless, when one knows that (2) is true, (1) and (3) are falsified; they are not true in a lower level of reality nor can either statements (1) or (3) be true on any supposedly higher level of reality either.

Consider other kinds of statements concerning differing perspectives on states of affairs:

1. On earth, things appear separate from one another, whether people or cities or nations.
2. From outer space the earth appears as one orb; separations are not visible.

Can these statements be arranged in a way analogous to Sankara’s levels of truth? Statement one is not negated by two; rather, one and two are complimentary descriptions of the same state of affairs. The statements do not contradict each other. We are members of one planet; but we are individuals who are, nevertheless, separable from each other in numerous ways: genetically, ethnically, sexually, geographically, politically, etc.

Now consider types of scientific descriptions to see if a two-level view of truth will emerge.

1. Newtonian physics accurately describes and predicts the motion of medium-sized objects.
2. Einsteinian physics accurately describes and predicts not only the motion of medium-sized objects but also that of the very small and the very large.

But this kind of example won’t work for Sankara’s purposes because both scientific theories relate to the same reality, the cosmos; whereas

Brahman and *maya* describe different orders of being. The reference- or explanatory-range of Einsteinian physics is greater than Newtonian physics, but the former does not, it can be argued, contradict the latter (as Brahman contradicts *maya*) but expands upon Newtonian physics by showing its limitations. Sankara, on the other hand, wants to claim that *maya* and Nirguna Brahman are two entirely disparate fields of reference with contradictory properties.

Sankara's attempt to rescue logic through a two-level view of truth seems to fail because the ultimate reality of Brahman ends up negating and contradicting the appearance of duality (however real it may *seem*). Consider his statement about Brahman:

The same highest Brahman constitutes . . . the real nature, i.e. that aspect of it which depends on *fictitious* limiting conditions, is not its real nature. For as long as the individual self does not free itself from [ignorance] in the form of duality—which [ignorance] may be compared to the mistake of him who in twilight mistakes a post for a man [superimposition]—and does not rise to the knowledge of the Self, whose nature is unchangeable, eternal Cognition—which expresses itself in the form “I am Brahman”—so long, it remains the individual soul.⁴

If there is one supreme and nondual reality of Brahman then any determinative attributes pertaining to duality, individuality, and finitude (whether respecting selves, the physical world, or Suguna Brahman) cannot obtain; they cannot truly describe actually existing conditions. An object cannot both be finite and infinite in the same respect at the same time (courtesy of the law of noncontradiction). Yet this is exactly what the two-truth theory gives us: The individual self is limited and part of a plurality of selves, but the Brahman Self is unlimited and absolutely unitary. How can the word “self” be used in the same or a similar way so as to convey any intelligible meaning in both instances? It is only used in an equivocal sense such that the referents “self” and “Self” cannot be the same entity because they possess mutually contradictory properties:

infinite/finite, one/many, eternal/temporal, etc. To refer to the individual self as “real” on only a lower level seems to solve nothing logically. Instead, it simply veils a deeper confusion.

The logical enigmas engendered by nondualism become painfully evident with respect to the doctrines of ignorance (*avidya*) and illusion (*maya*). What is the explanation for the ever-so-real-appearing world of the senses? There is none because the realm of Brahman consciousness is incommensurate with *maya*; that is, there is no logical relationship between the two. Deutsch explains that the questions of the “ontological source” of ignorance and illusion cannot be “intelligibly asked” according to Sankara because “knowledge and ignorance cannot co-exist in the same individual, for they are contradictory, like light and darkness.”⁵ Deutsch comments on this statement by Sankara:

Knowledge destroys ignorance, hence, from the standpoint of knowledge, there is no ignorance whose origin stands in question. And when in ignorance, one . . . [cannot] describe the process by which this ignorance ontologically comes to be.⁶

There are only three logical sources for *maya*. And it seems entirely appropriate to search for an ontological source since the two-level view of truth attempts to grant some sense of reality to the lower level of *maya*.

1. *Maya* originates from Brahman.
2. *Maya* originates from individual selves.
3. *Maya* originates from nothing.

Concerning option one, Sankara claims that *maya* mysteriously results from the play (*lila*) of Brahman. Brahman, in a sense, engages in *magic* to produce *maya* (the two words are related in Sanscrit). But this option clearly fails since Brahman cannot be the ontological source of that

which contradicts its essence. If there is no duality or principle of difference in “the One without second” (as the sacred text puts it), Brahman cannot be the source of *maya*. Given nondualism, there is no ontological “space” for such a reality. One might counter that the God of monotheism is in a similar pickle with respect to evil that exist in God’s creation. An all-good God could not generate the opposite of goodness—evil. But the analogy fails for two reasons. First, monotheism is predicated on the idea of an ontologically real creation that is distinct from and contingent upon its Creator. In this (finite) ontological space things may occur that do not express the essence of God’s (infinite) character. Second, monotheists in the Augustinian tradition attribute evil to the defective management of a good creation by corruptible creatures. Evil is not directly caused by God, but by creatures.

Option two explains nothing since individual selves are part of what is to be explained in the first place. Illusion cannot explain illusion. Option three is logically difficult to sustain since the ancient Greek maxim *ex nihilo nihil fit* (from nothing nothing comes) eliminates this alternative. “Nothing,” by definition, has no generative powers.

Sankara’s multifaceted conundra may be encapsulated in a prayer attributed to him.

Forgive me, O Siva, my three great sins. I came on a pilgrimage to Kasi forgetting that you are omnipresent; in thinking about you, I forget that you are beyond thought; in praying to you I forget that you are beyond words.⁷

If the analysis given in this paper is correct, Sankara’s metaphysics and epistemology of nondualism is logically untenable at the deepest levels, because it fails to give a plausible account of the relationship of Brahman to *maya*. If so, even prayer will be to no avail in its defense.

Notes

1. *Commentary on Bhhad-aranyaka Upanishad*, IV,4,6 quoted in Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu, HI: The University Press of Hawaii, 1969), 95.
2. I derive these categories from Stuart Hackett's find study, *Oriental Philosophy: A Westerner's Guide to Eastern Thought* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), chapter four.
3. Deutsch, *op. cit.*, 90; emphasis mine.
4. From *The Vedanta Sutras of Badarayana with the Commentary of Sankara*, trans. George Thibaut, 2 parts (New York: Dover, 1962), 1.3.19; quoted by David Clark and Norman Geisler, *Apologetics in the New Age: A Christian Critique of Pantheism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 165; emphasis mine.
5. Quoted in Deutsch, 85.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Radhakrishnan, *The Brahma Sutras*, 37-38; quoted in Troy Wilson Organ, *The Hindu Quest for the Perfection of Man* (Athens, OH: Ohio University, 1970), 191.