

Śaṅkara and the *Advaita Vedānta*¹

The whole Hindu Tradition is essentially founded on the *Veda*, meaning Sacred Science and Traditional Knowledge par excellence. The diverse metaphysical and cosmological conceptions of India are not at all incompatible. They are developments, *darśana* (perspectives), of the one doctrine constituted by the *Veda*, principle and foundation of all derived Branches.

Vedānta, etymologically “end of the *Veda*”, is one of the six *darśana* of Hindu spirituality and is based on the teaching of the *Upaniṣad*, which are themselves an integral part of the *Veda*. The *Advaita Vedānta*² is a purely metaphysical doctrine which transcends religious dualism as well as ontological monism. Its fundamental theme is the research of the Absolute. Thus, *Advaita Vedānta* constitutes *brahmavidyā*, knowledge of *Brahman*, and it is essentially characterized as *Advaitavāda*, “the Doctrine of Non-duality”. In *Advaitavāda*, *Brahman*, supreme Principle, is referred to as “without-a-second”, because it is beyond any determination.

Based on Raphael’s writings, a synthesis of the *Advaita* follows, with special reference to several of its founding principles. These founding principles have been often interpreted following the letter rather than Śaṅkara’s spirit, which has given rise to misunderstandings and incomprehensions.

The essence of the *Advaita* teaching is contained in this “simple” statement:

«*Brahman* is the only Reality, the world is non-real and “That thou art” (*Tat tvam asi*)».

(*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*: VI, VII, 7)

According to *Advaita Vedānta*, Reality must be constant, identical to itself, self-demonstrable, indivisible, infinite, and outside of space-time-causality. Furthermore, *Vedānta* develops its examination of the Real on all systems of coordinates, on all levels of Being, from the individual to the universal.

Stating that «*Brahman* is the sole Reality» the objection could be: all the rest is “illusion”. This objection has often been raised and continues to be raised with regard to Śaṅkara’s doctrine.

The question, though, should be put in a different way, i.e.: if only *Brahman* is the sole Reality, then what we see and perceive, what is it?

In his commentary to Gauḍapāda’s *Kārikā* to the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, Śaṅkara

¹ “Preface”, from Śaṅkara, *Āmabodha*, Translation from the Sanskrit, and commentary, by Raphael. Aurea Vidyā, New York, 2003.

² For a further comprehension of the *Advaita Vedānta*, cp. Gauḍapāda, *Māṇḍūkya-kārikā*, translated from the Sanskrit, and commented, by Raphael. Aurea Vidyā, New York, 2002.

affirms: «...this duality is nothing but *māyā*, also called phenomenal world»³.

The term *māyā* has many different meanings: “what makes the impossible possible”, “taking something for something else”, “veiling superimposition”, etc. In western terms we would say that *māyā* for Śaṅkara corresponds to what we would call “appearance”, “(changing) phenomenon”, “conformed movement (that shapes forms)”.

Because of *māyā* we mistake the rope for a snake, using Śaṅkara’s example. We superimpose one datum on another⁴.

It must be noted that *māyā* is not a *substantial* reality, that may disappear and be replaced by yet another substantial reality. In order to eliminate the snake seen in place of the rope, all needs be done is to open the eye of vision (knowledge). Similarly, in order to make a mental representation disappear, it is only necessary to still the mind.

Furthermore *māyā* is not “illusion”; this meaning is the one ascribed to it in the West, so much so that some people have given Śaṅkara’s doctrine the attribute of illusionism, in a disparaging sense as well. An illusion in the strict sense of the term, produces nothing, is non-existent; an illusory event is comparable to the “horns of a hare”, while Śaṅkara maintains that the *māyā*-universe is not like the “horns of a hare” or the “child of a barren woman”⁵.

If an event or a datum is able to modify our preexisting state of consciousness it cannot be called illusion. That snake that modifies our consciousness surely had a starting point or a real base in order to subsist. It cannot be born of nothing. Its base is in effect the rope (reality).

To comprehend *māyā* correctly and in the context of Traditional *Advaita*, the above considerations are important. In fact, its erroneous interpretation may lead the individual to a stance that could develop into nihilism, according to which everything, subject, object and the substratum of both is reduced to nothingness. Such a statement is refuted by *Vedānta*, which affirms that everything can be negated except the ultimate Witness which is negating...

If we refer to the spirit rather than the letter of Śaṅkara’s doctrine, we can see that *Advaita Vedānta* maintains that, all that belongs to the process of becoming, together with its implications, *has its value and degree of truth only as long as one is involved in the process*.

...

Here again Śaṅkara has posed the problem correctly: the empirical world has its meaning and its *raison d’être* as long as we are identified with it.

³ *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* with Gauḍapāda’s *Kārikā* and Śaṅkara’s commentary: I, 17. Edizioni Aśram Vidyā, Roma. [Italian edition].

⁴ This fundamental problem of “superimposition” (*adhyāropa*) and of “substitution” (*adhyāsa*) has been examined by Śaṅkara in his “Introduction” to his Commentary of the *Brahmasūtra* of Bādarāyaṇa.

⁵ *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*: IV, 40; III, 28. Op. cit.

...

The metaphysics of Non-duality does not propose to disregard or deny *māyā*, as such an attitude would also fall within *avidyā*. *Advaita* is saying that one ought not to create identification nor identity with *māyā*, nor to superimpose *māyā* on Reality, hence mistaking the rope for a snake.

From this metaphysical perspective, life cannot be in opposition with anything or anybody, because for such a vision both the phenomenon and the noumenon are resolved into the One-without-a-second.

Some see in *Advaita Vedānta* a sort of “philosophical phenomenism”, others equate it to “pantheism (immanentism)”, still others identify it with a form of idealism, “subjective idealism” or “objective idealism”.

...

“Philosophical phenomenism” maintains that all is phenomenon, including Reality itself as well as the individual in its totality. Śāṅkara asserts instead that behind the phenomenon exists the Reality which is not phenomenon, and this Reality constitutes the Constant without birth, time, space and causality. Behind the phenomenon-*māyā* is *Brahman*, both Absolute and Infinite. ...

Phenomenalism thus postulates a contradiction, that of *absolute relativism*.

“Pantheism” states that all is nature, that a transcendent Entity does not exist, that all is immanent in absolute terms, and that Deity itself is exhausted in the World. This is not in agreement with *Advaita*. According to *Advaita* a situation of non-reciprocity exists in the relation of *Brahman* and World. «*Brahman*, in truth, is other than the [sensible-intelligible] universe, [however] nothing else exists outside of *Brahman*. Wherever something other than *Brahman* appears to be manifest, it is fallacious, just like the apparition of a mirage in the desert». (*ātmabodha*, 63).

“Subjective idealism” negates the external material reality altogether and takes everything back to one’s own individual consciousness. Because it recognizes as real only the subjective idea of the single individual, this vision results in a dangerous solipsism.

“Objective idealism” posits the object independent of the perceiving subject. It makes everything depend on the object, whether individual or universal.

The last two philosophical currents, subjective and objective idealism, cannot be confused with *Advaita Vedānta*. According to *Advaita*, both the individual and the universal, although they are each accorded a degree of reality, resolve into *Brahman*.