

Vedānta and Indian Philosophy

Making Room for ‘‘Brahman’’

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Śaṅkara Miśra, a Naiyāyika who lived in the fifteenth century, begins his work entitled, *Bhedaratna*, ‘‘The Jewel of Distinctness,’’ by quoting Upaniṣadic passages at length, interpreting them in an anti-Advaita fashion, and by claiming, in effect, that Nyāya is the true Vedānta. The great popularizer of Vedānta to the West, Swami Vivekananda, at the Chicago Parliament of World Religions in 1892, proclaimed, ‘‘All religions are true.’’ The Advaitin Ādi Śaṅkara asserts both that Brahman is world-creator and that the non-dualistically self-aware *ātman* knows no world but only itself. Śaṅkara, Bhāskara, Rāmānuja, Nimbarka, Madhva, Vallabha, and other classical philosophers write commentaries on classical Vedānta’s root text, the *Brahmasūtra*, commentaries that, while defending what is taken to be the *Brahmasūtra*’s assertions, present significantly different worldviews. Each of these philosophers fills out a core commitment in incompatible ways. The twelfth-century dialectical Advaitin, Śrīharṣa, who refutes a host of philosophic tenets current in his time, appears to believe that no assertion other than the Upaniṣadic declaration of Brahman can withstand scrutiny. Classical Vedāntins swear allegiance to the teachings of *śruti*, the revelations of the Upaniṣads, whose *mahāvākya*-s, ‘‘great statements,’’ are taken to be, properly interpreted, infallible. But in this century Sri Aurobindo rejects the infallibility claim, and sees Upaniṣadic teachings as records of mystical experience, to which he purports to attune his philosophy, called by him a modern Vedānta. Vedāntin philosophers of all periods, even Śrīharṣa,

borrow extensively from philosophers of other schools. In Śrīharṣa’s case, arguments are what are lifted (some, astoundingly, from Cārvāka, an anti-religious school). Other Vedāntins graft onto their sense of an Upaniṣadic central teaching growths spliced from Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Bauddha schools, Jaina philosophies, Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsā (above all), and in more recent times from Immanuel Kant (by K. C. Bhattacharyya), G. W. F. Hegel (by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan), and Herbert Spencer and William James (by Aurobindo). My thesis, which is hardly novel or, I would think, controversial—though probably worth reminding ourselves of—is that such protean character exhibited by Vedānta through its long history, its adaptability and variety, is accounted for by the rich diversity of classical Indian philosophic thought, on the one hand, and the restrictedness of Vedānta’s core commitment—namely, to the reality of Brahman—on the other.

To show the centrality of the commitment to Brahman’s reality and to illumine the variety within Vedānta, I shall take up what some might assume is the strongest evidence against my thesis and against any unitary interpretation of Vedānta: the attacks launched by Vedāntins against rival positions. My aim is to show that the assaults are motivated by a sense of incompatibility with Brahman. My argument is that although distinct views of Brahman’s nature have led to distinct targets of Vedāntic polemics, the project, common to all, is to establish room for the Brahman conception. Sometimes, making room for ‘Brahman’ has meant severe aggression toward even the most world-oriented philosophies, inasmuch as the reality of Brahman has been thought to have definite ramifications for the ways finite things are or are interrelated. And sometimes making room for ‘Brahman’ has required hardly any combat at all. But at the

heart of all Vedānta's relation to other schools and non-Vedāntic philosophic tenets is the issue of whether what the non-Vedāntins say leaves room for the reality of Brahman.

*pūrṇam adaḥ pūrṇam idam pūrṇāt pūrṇam udacyate |
pūrṇasya pūrṇam ādāya pūrṇam eva avasiṣyate ||*

“That is the Full; this is the Full. From the Full, the Full comes forth.

Of the Full, taking away the Full, it is just the Full that remains.”

This *maṅgala-vācāna* prefaces several current editions of collected Upaniṣads, and is widely quoted by Vedāntins, both classical and modern. It suggests the mathematics of the infinite: infinity plus infinity equals infinity; infinity minus infinity equals infinity. An infinite set can be mapped in a one-to-one correspondence with a proper subset of itself: “From the Full, the Full comes forth.” Accordingly, it appears that Brahman is thought to have a different nature from that of finite things encountered through perceptual experience—a point made in a variety of ways by numerous classical and modern Vedāntins. And it is often claimed that the Full that is Brahman is conceptually indeterminate, beyond the logic of thought trained in the school of the finite and physical. “That from which words turn back, unattaining, together with the mind,” so says the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.4.9: *yato vāco nivartante, aprāpya manasā saha*).

Now if the nature of Brahman is entirely “other” to our thought and common experience, then a philosophy of Brahman might just add, to other propositions that we know, the claim that there is such a Brahman, an assertion appended as a mere conjunction: our determinate finite world

and the infinite, indeterminate Brahman. Then insofar as non-Vedāntic philosophies are occupied with questions within the realm of the finite and determinate—the finitely psychological, moral and epistemic norms, etc.—such views would appear to be compatible with Vedānta. That is to say, if at the core of Vedānta is a commitment merely to the reality of Brahman, then the question of the compatibility of Brahman with other things that we know, is easily resolved: why should there not be the world we know and Brahman? However, no Vedāntic view is quite so minimalist and unelaborated. The question of the room for ‘Brahman’ hinges on what is held to be the relation of Brahman to our universe of finites, a relation that is typically taken to flow out of Brahman’s intrinsic nature.

Before looking closely at Vedāntic attacks along with views of Brahman’s relationality, I must back up for a moment to distinguish the Vedānta that is a classical school and modern philosophy, on the one hand, from the Vedānta of early Upaniṣads, on the other. I mean, there is an important distinction argumentwise and concerning what is taken as given or assumed. In early Upaniṣads, a view of Brahman is often not taken as given, but rather ‘Brahman’ is a place-holder for something to be discovered, something momentous to be discovered. Or, if its discovery is being reported, there is the excitement of the find, without much attempt at close, coherent description. And the arguments, such as we find them, are not top-down, from Brahman to the world, as in classical Vedānta, but rather bottom-up, or cosmological, such as this one in the *Chāndogya*: ‘. . . some say: ‘Just Non-being was this in the beginning, one only, without a second; from the Non-being Being was born.’ But how, indeed, my dear, could this be?’ . . . On the contrary, my

dear, just Being was this in the beginning, one only, without a second.’’
 (6.2.1-2: *eka āhur asad eva idam agra āsīd ekam eva advitīyaṃ tasmād
 asataḥ saḥ jāyate || kutas tu khalu soṃya evaṃ syād iti katham asataḥ saḥ
 jāyate | sat tv eva soṃya idam agra āsīd ekam eva advitīyam.*) In later
 Upaniṣads, in contrast, and most distinctly in the *Brahmasūtra* (*BS*),
 which is, let me say again and stress, the founding document of Vedānta
 as a classical school, a view of Brahman is not being arrived at by
 cosmological arguments or mystic discoveries but is already possessed,
 and in the sūtras is articulated, complete with arguments against views
 considered incompatible with a commitment to Brahman’s reality. This is
 an important point that is prone to be obscured by the use to which
 Upaniṣads have been put by spiritual seekers, as spurs to fresh
 meditational probes, as opposed to classical philosophers’ combing the
 corpus for proof texts.

In the *BS*, the proposition that Brahman is the world’s cause is
 defended against incompatible positions known to Bādarāyaṇa, the author,
 or compiler, of the sūtras. Although much psychological wisdom and
 mystic advice, distilled from Upaniṣads and other sources, are presented
 by Bādarāyaṇa, little or no explicit opposition to rival schools can be
 discerned on such topics. Concerning Brahman as related to the world as
 its cause, in contrast, Sāṃkhya, Buddhist, Vaiśeṣika, and Jaina positions
 are disputed, but only insofar as they would challenge this single premise.
 I repeat, the polemics of the *BS* against non-Vedāntic schools are defenses
 of the *BS*’s assertion that Brahman stands as the world’s cause.

Now, the variety of interpretations of the way, or ways, in which
 Brahman may be said to be related to the world as its cause, is, as is well
 known, much disputed intracamp, among Vedāntins, with a wide range of

outlook presented, teaching us, by the way, much about causality, about distinct causal dimensions. The intracamp arguments are, however, outside the scope of this paper, which is restricted to Vedānta’s attitudes toward other schools of classical philosophy. Yet considering precisely which arguments are advanced by which disputants, the line between Vedānta and non-Vedānta becomes blurred, in that, depending on how Brahman is viewed as cause, this or that allegiance, interschool, is formed, as well as corresponding animosities. For example, whereas Śāṅkara, in his commentary on *BS* 2.1.18, attacks the Vaiśeṣika understanding of a type of causality called inherence, *samavāya*, which is said to hold between a property and the thing that exhibits it, several other commentators find this a particularly important relation, being, indeed, that between Brahman and the individual soul. Madhva, the dualist, or Dvaitin, eschews such a view, but he upholds a close correlate of inherence, as key to differentiating individuals, such as Brahman versus worldly things, a differentiation that Madhva sees as necessary to uphold Brahman’s relation to the world as instrumental cause. Madhva’s subtle disagreement with Vaiśeṣika’s *samavāya* flows out of his overriding commitment to Brahman as the world’s instrumental cause, as, similarly, Śāṅkara’s attack flows out of his view that Brahman’s relation to the world is identity.

As my time is short in this forum, let me turn to one last test of my thesis, the dialectical Advaita Vedānta of Śrīharṣa, who, because he vehemently attacks so much of the philosophy current in his time, may be taken especially to challenge my view that a Vedāntin’s sense of what the relation is between Brahman and the finite universe is the spur to polemics, the spur that drives Vedāntins to attack rival systems in an effort

to show room for “Brahman.” How do Śrīharṣa’s assaults on, in particular, Nyāya, flow out of his sense of a relation between Brahman and finite things? Does Śrīharṣa even have a sense of such a relation? This clever debator, famously taking the negative side, does, after all, proffer very little in a positive vein about Brahman’s relationality.

Yet Śrīharṣa does not attack just any position but rather those that are premised on fundamental distinctness (*bheda*). He reasons that since Brahman is the only reality, the phenomenal display (*prapañca*) of things as separate from Brahman and from one another has to be appearance only and not real. Śrīharṣa believes that the deep fact that diversity is only apparent can be revealed by dialectical criticism, which, by showing the impossibility of things conceived as fundamentally distinct, should lead, by eliminative argument, a deluded opponent to harken to the Upaniṣadic teaching of the reality of the all-inclusive Brahman. Although the overall strategy of Śrīharṣa’s refutations is to loosen an opponent philosopher’s attachment to a system premised on distinctness, and to listen to the proclamations of the Upaniṣads, at places, Śrīharṣa evokes the logic of indirect proof: since the position that things are fundamentally distinct lands, as shown, in incoherence, one is forced to accept its opposite, namely, fundamental non-distinctness, which is another name for Brahman. But the usual pattern is to show only that there is room for “Brahman,” with the Upaniṣads responsible for informing us of Brahman’s reality. Showing room for “Brahman” is a difficult task for Śrīharṣa, just because he sees Brahman’s reality as entailing that no diversity really be. The ontology of Nyāya, which bears the brunt of Śrīharṣa’s attacks, is assaulted because it is premised on diversity being real. Nyāya’s understanding of perception, inference, and other *pramāṇas*

is attacked to show that no *pramāṇa* can warrant a view of distinctness as real. Why? Though Śrīharṣa is not frank about his motives, it seems clearly to be because he holds the reality of diversity of to be precluded because of the reality of Brahman. Thus, views premised on a fundamental distinctness have to be refuted to show the possibility that Brahman be real.

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