

Philosophical Contents of Vedanta Philosophy

Nagappa Gowda K

Associate Professor of Political Science, Government First Grade College

Carstreet, Mangalore,

Dakshina Kannada, Karnataka State

Abstract

Some of the better-known sub-traditions of Vedanta include Advaita (non-dualism), Vishistadvaita (qualified non-dualism), and Dvaita (dualism). Over time, Vedanta adopted ideas from other orthodox (astika) schools like Yoga and Nyaya, and became the most prominent school of Hinduism. Many extant forms of Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism have been significantly shaped and influenced by the doctrines of different schools of Vedanta. The Vedanta school has had a historic and central influence on Hinduism. The denotation of Vedanta subsequently widened to include the various philosophical traditions based on to the prasthanatrayi. The Upanishads may be regarded as the end of Vedas in different senses- these were the last literary products of the Vedic period; these mark the culmination of Vedic thought; these were taught and debated in the brahmacharya (student) stage.

Key Words: Mimamsa, Vedanta, Bhagavadgita, Upanishads, Brahma Sutra, Prasthanatrayi, Badarayana, Adi Shankara, Advaita, Ramanujacharya, mahavakyas, Buddhism, Jainism, Nyaya, Vaishesika, Samkhya, Yoga, Madhvacharya.

The Mimamsa and Vedanta philosophies are closely connected; the former is also known as Purva Mimamsa and the latter as Uttara Mimamsa. Whereas Purva Mimamsa evolved out of the ritualistic part of the Vedas, the Vedanta represents the jnana segment of the Vedic thought and is the culmination of Upanisadic philosophy. Vedanta or Uttara Mimamsa is one of the six orthodox (astika) schools of Hindu philosophy. It literally means “the end of the Vedas”. It reflects ideas that emerged from the speculations and philosophies contained in the Upanisads. It does not stand for one comprehensive or unifying doctrine. Rather it is an umbrella term for many sub-traditions, ranging from dualism to non-dualism, all of which developed on the basis of a common textual connection called the prasthanatrayi. The prasthanatrayi is a collective term for the principal Upanisads, the Brahma Sutras and the Bhagavadgita. All Vedanta schools, in their deliberations, concern themselves with the following three categories but differ in their views regarding the concept and the relations between them: brahman- the ultimate metaphysical reality, atman/jivatman- the individual soul or self, and prakriti- the empirical world, ever-changing physical world, body and matter.

Upanisads and Vedanta

Vedanta and Upanisads are identical, and the word Vedanta originally referred to the Upanisads. Vedanta is founded on the jnana philosophy of the Upanisads and the Upanisads signify the jnanakanda or the knowledge part of the Vedas. There are above hundred Upanisads, composed by different sages in different time, but they follow unique methodology to describe the subject matter i.e., jnana/absolute brahman. Some of the Upanisads

are elaborate and many are written in symbolic language. The Sanskrit word Upanisad is derived from the roots- upa + ni + sad, which means, sit near a guru and learn. In clear terms, it implies, “jnana can be attained or truth can be comprehended or properly understood while sitting closely to the teacher”. That means, esoteric subject- brahmajnana can be attained/realised only by the guidance of a qualified guru (brahmanista). As the subject matter of the Upanisads is not clearly organised in the texts, and some of them carry contradictory and paradoxical statements regarding brahmajnana, Brahma Sutra was written with the intention of clarifying and reconciling these apparent contradictions by Vyasa, who is also known as Badarayana.

Major Questions of Vedanta and their Resolutions- Its' Teachings

Vedanta poses certain metaphysical, ontological and philosophical questions, for which it tries to gather answers from various texts of the Vedic knowledge, particularly from the Upanisads. Later, different schools of Vedanta considered and tried to interpret them in their own ways, that resulted in the emergence of various 'isms' such as monism, dual monism, dualism, qualified monism etc. In other words, various schools of the Vedanta were the result of different understandings and interpretations of these questions and their resolutions. The major questions include:

- a) What is brahman, the ultimate reality?
- b) What are prakriti, purusa, body, atman, self, matter etc.?
- c) What is being and becoming?
- d) Where do all physical and mental elements originate?
- e) What is the nature of the state of unity in which all elements dissolve and amalgamate?
- f) What is that element through which everything is known and manifest?
- g) What is that which makes unmanifest manifest and unknown known?
- h) What is the way for accomplishing immortality?
- i) What is birth and death? what happens after death? What is rebirth and what is moksha?
- j) What symbolizes body, mind and senses?
- k) How to understand karma, jnana, bhakti etc. as means for attaining liberation?
- l) What are saguna and nirguna brahman?

All the Upanisads share a common understanding regarding these inquiries and their resolutions. The following resolutions they commonly advance:

- a) The Vedanta unanimously believes in the existence of an all-pervasive brahman or atman, called the ultimate reality.
- b) It believes that the self is distinct from and unidentical with the body, mind and intellect which veil the true nature of the self.
- c) The pain and pleasure, cold and heat etc., one experiences are considered to be fleeting and transitory modes of the body, mind and senses, born of ignorance and not real.
- d) The self is eternal and means to realize the ultimate truth. The pure self is the ultimate source of all joy and knowledge.
- e) Self-realization by transcending material body-related senses, and becoming united with the ultimate reality through the pure self is the highest goal of life. This is called moksha or kevala or liberation.

f) Renouncing ego, senses and external rituals, and contemplating oneself with inner truth or consciousness is the path of true knowledge.

g) The Vedanta uniformly reject the ultimate presence of the multiplicity of the objects. It believes that all diverse names and forms are simple illusions, maya. Unchanging eternal reality or brahman is permanent, from where life emerges and dissolves.

h) The permanent eternal element is free from all the worldly bondages. Jnana is the only means of attaining liberation.

Prasthanatrayi or Three Authorities

The Upanisads, the Bhagavadgita and the Brahma Sutras constitute the basis of Vedanta. All schools of Vedanta propounded their philosophies by interpreting or relating these texts, collectively called the prasthanatrayi, literally, three sources.

a) The Upanisads are considered as the foundation of Vedanta.

b) The Brahma Sutras are considered as the reason-based foundation of Vedanta.

c) The Bhagavad Gita is considered the smriti foundation of Vedanta.

The Brahma Sutras attempted to synthesize the teachings of the Upanisads. The diversity in the teaching of the Upanisads necessitated the systematization of these teachings. This was perhaps done in many ways in ancient India, but the only surviving version of this synthesis is the Brahma Sutras of Badarayana. All major Vedantic teachers, including Shankara (Advaita), Madhva (Dvaita), Bhaskara (Upadhika), Ramanuja (Vishistadvaita), Nimbarka (Dvaitadvaita), and Vallabha (Suddhadvaita) have composed commentaries not only on the Upanisads and Brahma Sutras, but also on the Bhagavadgita. The Bhagavadgita, due to its syncretism of Samkhya, Yoga, and Upanisadic thought, has played a major role in evolving Vedantic thought.

Prior to the Brahma Sutras

Little is known of the schools of Vedanta existing before the composition of the Brahma Sutras (400-450 B. C). It is clear that, Badarayana, who authored the Brahma Sutras, was not the first person to systematize and consolidate the teachings of the Upanisads, as he mentions six Vedantic teachers prior to him- Ashmarathya, Badari, Audulomi, Kashakrtsna, Karsnajini and Atreya. References to other early Vedanta teachers- Brahmadatta, Sundara, Pandaya, Tanka and Dravidacharya- are found in different secondary literature of later periods. However, the works of these ancient teachers have not survived.

Badarayana summarized and interpreted the teachings of the classical Upanisads in his Brahma Sutras, which is also known as the Vedanta Sutra. While refuting the rival philosophical schools and their contradictory thoughts that emerged after the composition of the Upanisads, the Brahma Sutras laid the basis for the evolution of the Vedanta philosophy. Though attributed to Badarayana, the Brahma Sutras were likely composed by multiple authors over the course of hundreds of years.

Between Brahma Sutras and Adi Shankara

Little is known with specificity, the period between the Brahma Sutras, which was composed in the 5th century B.C. and Adi Shankara of 8th century A. C. Only two writings of this period have survived- Bhartrhari's Vakyapadiya and Gaudapada's Karika, probably written in the 5th and 6th century A.C respectively. Quite interestingly, Shankara mentions 99 different predecessors of his school in his commentaries.

Gaudapada, Adi Shankara and Advaita Vedanta

Gaudapada was the teacher or a more distant predecessor of Govindapada, the teacher of Adi Shankara. Shankara is widely considered as the founder of Advaita Vedanta. Besides Shankara's works, Gaudapada's treatise, the Karika is the earliest surviving complete text on Advaita Vedanta. Gaudapada's Karika was written by taking overboard the central tenets of the Mandukya, Brhadaranyaka and Chandogya Upanisads. Adi Shankara (788–820), was one of the most ancient scholars to write detailed commentaries on the prasthanatrayi and Gaudapada's Karika. Because of this, sometimes only his philosophy is accounted to be Vedanta. The Mandukya Upanisad and the Karika have been described by Shankara as containing "the epitome of the substance of the import of Vedanta". It was Shankara who synthesised Gaudapada work with the ancient Brahma Sutras.

Advaita Vedanta explains non-dualism and monism. Brahman is held to be the sole unchanging metaphysical reality and identical to atman. The physical world, on the other hand, is always evanescent empirical Maya. The absolute and infinite atman-brahman is realized by a process of repudiating everything relative, finite, empirical and changing. The school rejects duality, limited individual souls (atman/jivatman), and separate unlimited cosmic soul. All souls and existence across space and time is considered as the same oneness (i.e. monism). Spiritual liberation in Advaita is the full comprehension and realization of this truth of oneness, that one's unchanging atman (soul) is the same as the atman in everyone else, as well as being identical to the nirguna brahman. Following are the important aspects of Advaita Vedanta of Shankara:

- a) Self is the all-pervading, self-illuminated consciousness. It is beyond the realms of time and space and cannot be comprehended by the ordinary senses or the mind. It is the highest truth. Self is identical with paramatman and hence, they have no separate entities. It has no beginning and no end. It is immutable and eternal.
- b) Self is within the body and outside of it, but is separate from it. The body is composed of matter, hence mortal, the soul is beyond birth and death.
- c) Self is the source of intelligence, consciousness, and wisdom, and is untouched by the external occurrences. Brahman is the resplendent, unaffected, and unchanged absolute.
- d) Self is the inherent essence of all beings, it is perfect. It is endless, only the physical body is circumscribed by life and death.
- e) Brahman is the ultimate truth and whatever exists and does not exist in the manifest world is brahman. The real nature of brahman in worldly objects is hidden from the ignorant. Brahman is the source of existence, from which emanates the entire universe.
- f) There is only one reality- brahman, nothing exists separate from it. The external world appears to be real only due to the ignorance of the mind. Ignorance is known as maya, the cosmic illusion.
- g) Truth is veiled in maya, or ignorance which must be removed for one to realize the ultimate truth. The entire universe is the projection of maya. Because maya covers the truth, the individual self, misconstrues both the world and itself as being different from brahman. All external and internal phenomena belong to the apparent reality, and the brahman alone is the absolute reality.
- h) The state in which brahman is consciously associated with maya to create the universe is called Isvara or God. All animate and inanimate objects of the world are the result of the vibration of prana, the life force,

which is not different from maya. In other words, the entire universe is derivative of brahman associated with maya, which is termed Isvara. There is no such thing as dead matter in the universe; the universe, in its entirety, is a living organism.

Ramanuja's Vishistadvaita Vedanta

Ramanujacharya (1017–1137 A.C.) was the founder of the Vishistadvaita philosophy of Vedanta and the most influential philosopher of its tradition. Though his teacher, Yadava Prakasha, was a believer of the Advaita monastic tradition, Ramanuja, by rejecting his guru, taught the philosophy of qualified non-dualism. Tradition has it that Ramanuja disagreed with Yadava and Advaita Vedanta, and instead followed Nathamuni and Yamunacharya. He tried to reconcile the prasthanatrayi with theism, and philosophy of the Vaishnava Alvars poet-saints. Later, his Vishistadvaita thesis provided a philosophical base for Sri Vaishnavism. He authored a number of influential texts, such as a Bhasya on the Brahma Sutras and the Bhagavadgita, all in Sanskrit.

Ramanuja elaborately expounded the importance of bhakti, or devotion to a personal God (Vishnu in Ramanuja's case) as a means for spiritual liberation. He argued that there exists a plurality and distinction between atman (soul) and brahman (metaphysical, ultimate reality). He also affirmed monism by saying that there is unity of all souls, and the individual soul has the potential to realize its identity with the brahman. Vishistadvaita asserts that jivatman (human souls) and brahman (as Vishnu) are different, a difference that is never transcended.

Madhva's Dvaita

Madhvacharya (1238–1317 A.C.) propounded Dvaita or dualistic philosophy of the Vedanta. While rejecting the Vedantic ideas of both Shankara and Ramanuja, he advanced certain set of arguments that formed a new base for the Vedanta philosophy. In contrast to Shankara's non-dualism and Ramanuja's qualified non-dualism, he championed a philosophy called unqualified dualism. Like his predecessors, Madhva also produced extensive bhasyas or commentaries on the major texts of the Upanisads, Bhagavadgita and the Brahma Sutra. Dvaita Vedanta is theistic and it identifies brahman with Narayana, or more specifically, Vishnu, in a manner similar to Ramanuja's Vishistadvaita Vedanta. But it is more explicitly pluralistic. According to Madhva the self and brahman are not identical, hence, they are distinct entities.

He claimed that plurality is the fundamental principle of the universe and it can be understood in relation to:

- a) Material things
- b) Souls
- c) Material things and souls
- d) Material things and God, and
- e) Souls and God.

Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva

Though Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhvacharya were the major proponents of the Vedanta philosophy, their ideas do not corroborate each other. In fact, they did not try to advance a uniform or coherent theme for the Vedanta, rather made it a jumble of ideas. However, their different ideas and philosophies helped the Vedanta philosophy to expanding its base and structure in a significant way. The contrasting approaches adopted by the different Vedantic schools may be summarized thus: Repudiating the non-dualistic or monistic ideas of

Shankara, the Dvaita philosophy of Madhvacharya argues that, “man is a servant of God,” and hence, jivatman is different from brahman/Isvara; they are not one but dual. Vishistadvaita school of Ramanuja, on the other hand stated that, “man is a ray or spark of God”, therefore, non-dualism is qualified by difference. Jivatman is different from Isvara, though the former is eternally connected with the latter. The oneness of the supreme reality is understood in the sense of an organic unity. Brahman/Isvara alone, as organically related to all jivatman and the material universe is, the one ultimate reality.

Shankaracharya, while rejecting both, particularly Madhva, concluded that, “self is identical with brahman or the eternal soul”. His kevala Advaita philosophy does not believe in the philosophy that disassociates atman from brahman, and expounded a philosophy of unity and oneness of the atman and paramatman. Another view of the Vedanta states that the soul and the physical universe (prakriti) are both identical with and different from brahman. Suddhadvaita argued that (pure monism), jivatman and brahman are identical; both, along with the changing empirically-observed universe being Krishna. Despite these differences, however, all the schools of Vedanta share certain common ideas and grounds. All agree/share that:

- a) The Upanisads are a reliable source of knowledge. Vedanta is the pursuit of knowledge into the brahman and the atman.
- b) Brahman exists as the unchanging material and instrumental cause of the universe.
- c) They all believed in the philosophy of rebirth and expressed desirability to release from the cycle of rebirths, (moksha) as the ultimate goal of human life.
- d) The self (atman/jivatman) is the agent of its own acts (karma) and the recipient of the consequences of those actions.
- e) All of them rejected Buddhism and Jainism, and disagreed partly the conclusions of the other Vedic schools such as Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya Yoga etc.

Focus of Vedanta

Vedanta philosophy is basically built around three fundamental metaphysical categories and proceeds to explain elaborately their relations. These categories include:

- a) Brahman or Isvara, the ultimate reality
- b) Atman or Jivatman, the individual soul or self
- c) Prakriti/Jagat or the empirical world, everchanging physical universe, body and matter.

Vedanta depicts the physical universe as systematic process. It is composed of five gross elements such as earth, water, fire, air and space or ether. Major portion of the Vedanta philosophy regarding the nature of the universe is borrowed from the Samkhya. Maya or ignorance covers the real nature of the atman and brahman; the moment one understands the law of cosmic life and comprehends the reality beyond mortal things, he understands the truth of brahman behind the curtain of maya. Though, it suggests devotion to Isvara as an important means of liberation from the snares of the physical world, it prefers jnana or the path of knowledge as the effective method. Vedanta is the path of knowledge which requires one- pointed concentration and good balance, purified heart and mind; these qualities are obtained through study of scriptures, mental resolve, and withdrawal of the mind and senses from the external objects. Such detachment from the body and the universe would tread the path of Vedanta. Jnana yoga is practiced through the means of contemplation and meditation.

Vedanta strongly believes in four major statements which are called mahavakyas. It argues that, they are the guidelines for attaining the goal of life, i.e., moksha. Through proper understanding of the mahavakyas and incorporation of the techniques of purification of the mind and heart through meditation one can attain the reality. Renouncing the worldly attachments or the bindings of samsara is the ultimate path in the quest of ultimate truth.

- a) Brahman alone is real and the universe is ephemeral and hence, unreal
- b) The ultimate reality is one. There is only one Brahman or Isvara or Truth without the second.
- c) The self is Brahman, or 'I am Brahman', aham brahmasmi.
- d) The whole universe is Brahman; the reality is not known because of maya or ignorance.

Reference

- Surendranath Dasgupta, A History of Indian Philosophy, Vol. 1, Philosophy of Buddhist, Jaina and Six Systems of Indian Thought, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1922.
- Andrew J. Nicholson, Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History, Columbia University Press, 2013.
- Hajime Nakamura, A History of Early Vedanta Philosophy, Part 2, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1950.
- Sri Swami Sivananda, All About Hinduism, UP: A Divine Life Society Publications, 1947. Swami Nikhilananda, The Upanishads, A New Translation. Vol. 2, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008.
- P. T. Raju, The Philosophical Traditions of India, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1972.
- R. Dandekar, "Vedanta", MacMillan Encyclopedia of religion, 1987.
- M. Hiriyanna, The Essentials of Indian Philosophy, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1948. Mohan Lal Sandal (trans.), Jaimini: Mimamsa Sutras of Jaimini, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999.
- Julius J. Lipner, The Face of Truth: A Study of Meaning and Metaphysics in the Vedantic Theology of Ramanuja, New York: State University of New York Press, 1986.
- S. M. Srinivasa Chari, Fundamentals of Vishistadvaita Vedanta, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988.
- Stafford Betty, "Dvaita, Advaita, and Vishistadvaita: Contrasting Views of Moksha", Asian Philosophy, 20 (2), 2010, pp. 215-24.
- Eliot Deutsch, Rohit Dalvi, The Essentials of Vedanta: A New Source Book of Advaita Vedanta, USA: World Wisdom, 2004.
- Michael Comans, The Method of Early Advaita Vedanta: A Study of Gaudapada, Sankara, Suresvara, and Padmapada, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000.
- A. C. Das, "Brahman and Maya in Advaita Metaphysics", Philosophy East and West. 2 (2), 1952, pp. 144-54.
- Max F. Muller, Three Lectures on the Vedanta Philosophy, USA: Kessinger Publishing, 2003.
- N. V. Isaeva, Shankara and Indian Philosophy, New York: State University, 1992.
- B. N. K. Sharma, Philosophy of Sir Madhvacharya, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962.