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## A Philosophical Study of Advaita Vedānta's Perspective on the Nature of Brahman

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### Abstract

*This article's primary goal is to provide an analytical explanation of the Advaita Vedānta school's view of Brahman, or Absolute Being, as Sat or existing. In nature, Brahman's existence is absolute, which is significantly distinct from empirical reality. Understanding Brahman's Absolute nature requires an understanding of the Advaita Vedānta school's "Sattātraividhyavāda" concept. Furthermore, because of the fundamental shortcomings of conceptual cognition and human language with respect to the understanding and expression of the Absolute, Brahman cannot be understood logically or sufficiently described in terms of linguistic categories. Two distinct viewpoints are explored in the Advaita Vedānta School about the compatibility of the knower notion of Brahman. According to the compatibility of the knower notion of Brahman, in Advaita Vedānta School, is discussed from two different perspectives, viz., Parā-Brahman (Supreme Reality) and Aparā-Brahman (Lower Brahman). To explain the different manifestations of Brahman Śaṅkara makes a distinction between the essential description of Brahman (Svarūpa-Lakṣaṇa), which manifests or reveals Its essential nature, distinguishing it from the world of plurality and the accidental description i.e., The Taṭastha- Lakṣaṇa in which Brahman is described in relation to the world as a personal God or Saḡa Brahman or Īśvara.*

**Keywords:** Vedānta, Brahman, Jīva, Sattā-traividhyavāda, Saccidānanda, Taṭastha-Lakṣaṇa, Svarūpa-Lakṣaṇa.

**Introduction:** Advaita Vedānta is the name given to Śaṅkara's interpretation of the Vedānta Sūtra. The core of Advaita Vedānta philosophy can be summed up in half of a verse- "Brahman Satyam, Jaganmithyā, Jivo Brahmaiva nāparaḥ" - means Brahman is real, world is not real, there is no difference between Jīva and Brahman rather, Jīva is nothing but the Brahman.<sup>1</sup> The most important doctrine, which can be derived from this verse is, the

nonduality of the ultimate reality of Brahman as an Absolute Being. According to Advaita Vedānta school, Brahman is the only reality which is ultimate in nature. However, it is difficult to understand the substantiality of this view as it seems to be contradictory with our experience. As in our daily experience we perceive most of the objects of this universe as existent. To remove the apparent contradiction of this view, the notion of Brahman is to be explained in the light of the Doctrine of '*Sattā-traividhyavāda*' adopted in Advaita Vedānta school.

**Three grades of Reality:** Three grades of reality According to the Doctrine of *Sattā-traividhyavāda* there are three grades of existence or reality, viz., *Pāramārthika Sattā* or ultimate reality, *Vyāvahārika Sattā* or empirical reality which is also known as conventional reality and *Prātibhāṣika Sattā* or phenomenal reality. *Pāramārthika Sattā* or ultimate reality means that which is eternally real and can never be contradicted or negated by anything. Only Brahman has *Pāramārthika Sattā* or ultimate reality, which can never be contradicted by any other knowledge.<sup>2</sup> *Vyāvahārika Sattā* or conventional reality means that which is first perceived to be true but later on comes to be negated on the rise of real knowledge of the truth, i.e., knowledge of Ultimate Reality. The objects of the world hold such empirical reality or *Vyāvahārika Sattā*, which, seems to be real in our empirical experiences. However, it becomes false to a true seer who realizes the true nature of the Absolute Being as well as his own nature as identical with the Absolute Being. *Prātibhāṣika Sattā* or phenomenal reality means that which first perceived to be true but later on comes to be negated on the emergence of empirical knowledge of the truth, i.e., knowledge of *Vyāvahārika Sattā* or empirical reality.<sup>3</sup> As for example the knowledge of a snake-rope, this becomes false immediately after the knowledge of the empirical. Therefore, there are three kinds of existence: absolute, conventional and illusory. The apparent contradiction of the view can be removed with the help of the Doctrine of *Sattā-traividhyavāda*.<sup>4</sup> The claim of Advaita Vedānta school that the Brahman is the only reality does not withhold the existence from other empirical objects of our experience rather admits only different grades of existence to explain our experience. Indefinability of Brahman According to Śāṅkaracārya the notion of Brahman is indefinable.<sup>5</sup> The reason behind it, as explained by T.M.P. Mahadevan is, the insufficiency of human language and thought. For him, the nature of the non-dual Brahman can neither be apprehended by logical knowledge nor can be adequately defined in terms of language-categories. This is due to the inherent insufficiency of conceptual cognition and human language with regard to the apprehension and expression of the Absolute). The reality of non-dual Brahman to be grasped and categorized is the infinite, while the cognitive process of conceptualization and verbalization operates only in the sphere of duality. Mahadevan mentioned, "All language belongs to the realm of duality".<sup>6</sup> Before discussing the nature of Brahman it should be well understood that Brahman is unconditioned, and cannot be taught in the ordinary way. Whatever is within the scope of the sense organs can be conveyed through instruction to others with the help of some attributes and activities. However, Brahman does not belong in the realm of empirical entity,

which can be qualified by any attribute or activity. Brahman in its reality is beyond the realm of the empirical world. Only a true seer may realize the notion of Brahman.

**Nature of Brahman:** In Vivekacūḍāmaṇi Śaṅkarācārya mentioned, “The wise man realizes in his heart, through *samādhi*, the Infinite Brahman, which is something of the nature of eternal Knowledge and absolute Bliss, which has no exemplar, which transcends all limitations, is ever free and without activity, and which is like the limitless sky, indivisible, and absolute.”<sup>7</sup> In the verse in concern the word ‘something’ signifies ‘which is inexpressible in terms of speech and thought’. For him Brahman can only be realized but could not be described. He again describes- “There is only Brahman, the One without a second, whose real nature is incomprehensible, and which is beyond the range of mind and speech; there is no duality whatsoever in It.”<sup>8</sup> We found a distinction between two kinds of knowledge in the Upaniṣads, viz., the higher (Parā) and the lower (Aparā). The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad declares: Two kinds of knowledge are to be known – so indeed the knowers of Brahman declare – higher as well as the lower (Muṇḍaka1.1.4). All empirical knowledge belongs to the level of lower knowledge, when it is confined to a mere theoretical understanding of the supreme. The higher knowledge, however, is the direct and immediate apprehension of the Absolute as It is. “And the higher is that by which the Immutable is known”(Muṇḍaka1.1.5). According to Śaṅkarācārya, the pāramārthika alone is ultimately true, and Brahman in its true nature is nirguṇa in itself. Commenting on the text of Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad that speaks of the two kinds of knowledge of Brahman, Śaṅkarācārya dismisses the lower form of cognition as nescience. He claims that “The aparā-vidyā is really avidyā.”<sup>9</sup> Essential nature and accidental attributes According to the compatibility of the knower as expressed above, the notion of Brahman, in Advaita Vedānta School, is discussed from two different perspectives, viz., Parā Brahman (Supreme Reality) and Aparā-Brahman (Lower Brahman). To understand these two forms of Brahman in Advaita Vedānta, the notion of Brahman is discussed in terms of Its essential nature and in terms of Its accidental attributes respectively. To explain the different manifestations of Brahman. Śaṅkara makes a distinction between the essential description of Brahman (Svarūpa-Lakṣaṇa), which manifests or reveals Its essential nature, distinguishing it from the world of plurality and the accidental description i.e., The Taṭastha- Lakṣaṇa in which Brahman is described in relation to the world as a personal God or Saguṇa Brahman or Īśvara. Hence, the former provides the definition of the Ultimate reality while the latter one provides some qualifications of the ultimate reality which, is not real but accidental in nature. A definition serves to distinguish the defined from the whole world; a qualification, on the other hand, serves to distinguish the qualified from all others of the same species.<sup>10</sup>

The Svarūpa-Lakṣaṇa expresses the essential nature of Brahman while in Taṭastha-Lakṣaṇa, Brahman is described with the help of Its accidental attributes. Svarūpa-Lakṣaṇa and Taṭastha- Lakṣaṇa represent two different manifestations of Brahman, i.e., Parā-Brahman (Supreme Reality) and Aparā-Brahman (Lower Brahman) respectively.<sup>11</sup> Svarūpa-Lakṣaṇa or essential characteristics consist in the very nature (Svarūpa) of a concept. On the other hand, Taṭastha- Lakṣaṇa or secondary characteristic is that which, though not lasting

as long as the thing possessing it, yet differentiates it from other things.<sup>12</sup> As, the possession of smell is a (secondary) characteristic of earth, because there is no smell in atoms (of earth) at the dissolution of the universe, nor there is the presence of smell in jars etc. at the time of their origin. Therefore, Svarūpa-Lakṣaṇa is the real nature of Brahman, while Taṭastha-Lakṣaṇa describes Brahman to conceive the concept of Brahman though it is not Its real nature. Parā –Brahman (Supreme Reality) is defined in Svarūpa-Lakṣaṇana as Sat (Being), Cit (Consciousness), and Ānanda (Bliss) – these are not any attributes or properties of Brahman, rather Its very essence. When we utter Brahman is Sat or existent the underlying significance is Brahman is not asat or non-existent. While, It is defined as Cit or consciousness, signifies that it is not acit or unconsciousness.

Moreover, when we define Brahman as Ānanda or Bliss, meaning it is not the nature of pain (*duḥkhasvarūpa*). ‘Sat’, ‘Cit’ and ‘Ānanda’ are not the attributes of Brahman but the essence or svarūpa of Brahman. Brahman is defined as ‘*Saccidānanda*’. Even the definition of Brahman as *Saccidānanda* is imperfect though it expresses the reality in the best way possible as per Advaita Vedānta system. The next section is an argumentation dedicated to explain the essence of Brahman as ‘Sat’ or Absolute Reality, which is the main concern of this article. The Absolute Being as Existence According to Advaita Vedānta, Brahman is devoid of any kind of relations. It is unrelated to anything because there is nothing else with which It can be related. Relations cannot be real. Because they are neither of the nature of things nor of the nature of attributes. If we assume relations as the nature of things then there would be nothing to be related, since there is no other entity than Brahman. If relations are identified as attributes, then these must be either identical with things or be different from the things. If we consider the first alternative, then we are in a position of the former alternative, i.e. relations are of the nature of things, which has been already discarded. To consider the second alternative, if relations are different from things then we must have a new relation between the thing and the ultimate which is itself a relation, and this will involve us in the process of infinite regress.

**Brahman is “Ekamevādvitīyam”:** The Absolute Being which is the most perfect being cannot be determined by any relations. To limit it with any kind of relations signifies its determination.<sup>13</sup> All determination is negation. To limit It is to make It finite in nature. But that is not possible because Absolute Being is One only, without a second. That is why It cannot be limited by anything. Brahman is “*Ekamevādvitīyam*” (Chāndogya 3.14.5) that means, -‘Brahman is One only, without a second. The word ‘ekam’ stands for non-differentiation of parts or *swagata bhedarāhita*; ‘eva’ for homogeneous non differentiation or *sajātiya bhedarāhita* and the word ‘advitīya’ for heterogeneous non-differentiation or *vijātiyabhedarāhita* as per Advaita Vedānta school. The internal difference among the different parts of a thing is recognised as *swagata bheda*. As we found there are differences between the constituent parts of a tree as for example, one branch of tree is different from another branch, is an example of *swagata bheda*. The term *sajātiya bheda* signifies the difference between the objects of the same kind, as for example, a tree is different from another tree – this difference is known as *sajātiya bheda*. Similarly, *vijātiyabheda* indicates

the difference between two things which are not of the same kind, as a tree is different from an animal – this difference constitutes *vijātiyabheda*. According to Śaṅkarācārya, Brahman is devoid of all these differences. Therefore, Brahman is devoid of any kind of relation.

Arguments in explaining the *bhedarāhita* of Brahman may be represented in the following manners. The Absolute Being has no internal modes, because It is not a whole constituted by parts. Parts can be attributed only to inert matter. But Absolute Being or Sat is not inert rather It is pure consciousness or *śuddhacaitanya*. Absolute Being or Sat is an indivisible unitary principle. Assuming It as a whole constituted by parts, we must enquire whether the parts are intelligent or inert. If they are intelligent then they are either different or non-different from the Sat. They cannot be different from the Absolute Being, as the scriptural texts which proclaim the one reality would then become invalid. If we assume that they are non-different from the Absolute Being, then they would not be able to be the part of the same. To be the part of the whole they must be either intelligent or inert. They cannot be inert because if the parts are held to be inert, then the Absolute Being, which is constituted of the parts must also be inert. Whatever is inert in nature is subject to origination and decay and, therefore, cannot be real or Sat. This assumption, i.e., 'Absolute Being is a whole constituted by parts', leads us to the absurd position to state that 'sat is asat', which is an example of self-contradiction. Therefore, Absolute Being or Sat is not a whole constituted of parts. Even names and forms cannot be the constituents of the Sat.<sup>14</sup> The term 'sat' attributed to the Absolute Being for empirical purposes only. Because the term 'Sattā' or the 'Absolute Being' is the highest category that human mind can constitute for its understanding of the notion of the ultimate reality. Names and forms cannot be the limits of the Absolute Being since prior to creation they are non-existent. Hence, the Absolute Being is devoid of internal differentiation or *Swagata- bhedarahita*. There cannot be many Absolute Beings as it would contradict the conclusions of scripture. If the Absolute Being is assumed as many, then they are to be either limited or unlimited. But, both the assumptions are not valid, since a limited real cannot be sat or ultimate reality as it is limited by others.

On the other hand, an unlimited real can only be one, because if we assume more than one entity as unlimited then they would be limited by one another. Therefore, the Absolute Being is devoid of differentiation of the same kind or It is *sajātiya bhedarahita*, this is conveyed by the term 'eva' indicating emphasis. The sat has no contradictory absurd like the horns of a hare. An unreal entity cannot be the pratiyogī counter entity of anything real. The asat is incapable of being the counter-entity of Sat. Hence, there can be no entity apart from the Sat. Thus, the Absolute Being has no heterogeneous difference or *vijātiyabheda* as well. This is asserted by the term '*advitīyam*' in the Upaniṣadik text (Chāndogya 3.14.5).

According to Śaṅkarācārya, Brahman is One Being, without a second, without anything else like attributes, powers, parts, effects, transformations, manifestations, changes, activities, progress, salvation- but only Pure Being, Mere Existence. We have to be aware of the view that Existence represents only the Svarūpa or nature or essence of Brahman, and

not its Gūṇa or attribute or property. Brahman is a Pure-Mere-Sheer-Bare Being or Existence, without a second.<sup>15</sup> One may raise a question that why Brahman is defined in Svarūpa-Lakṣaṇa with the help of a positive along with a negative expression at the same time? The reason behind it is Brahman is infinite in nature and anything which is infinite in nature cannot be qualified with an adjective either in assertion or in negation.

**Brahman is Sat Cit Ānanda:** Whenever we would try to qualify the infinite Brahman with the help of a qualifier would actually destroy its infinite nature by limiting its entity with that qualifier either positive or negative. Therefore, it is not possible to express the real nature of Brahman with the help of any kind of attributes. That is why Brahman is expressed in assertion with a negative adjunct as ‘Brahman is Sat means it is not asat, Brahman is Cit means it is not acit and Brahman is Ānanda means it is not the nature of pain (duḥkhasvarūpa). With the help of Taṭastha- Lakṣaṇa or secondary characteristic, Aparā-Brahman (Lower Brahman) is described in Advaita Vedānta School as “*janmādy asya yataḥ*”, (The Brahma Sūtra 1.1.2) i.e., (Ultimate Reality is that) from which origin, etc. (i.e. subsistence and destruction) of this (would proceed). The word etcetera here includes subsistence (*sthiti*) and dissolution (*bhaṅga* or *laya*) of the universe. If we do not include these two terms namely, *sthiti* and *bhaṅga* to replace the term etcetera then it may mislead us as the Brahman is the cause of only the origin of this universe. However, Brahman is not only the cause of the origin of this universe but also the cause of its subsistence and dissolution. The features of Brahman described in Taṭastha-Lakṣaṇas are not real nature but commenting on the spatial conception of Brahman. Śaṅkarācārya says that, it is meant to convey our ideas to others or serve the purposes of worship.

**Conclusion:** After an analytical consideration of the nature of Brahman, it is obvious that, Brahman is the Absolute Reality that cannot be expressed through speech or mind. It can only be perceived, but not described. The term ‘Sattā’ or ‘Absolute Being’ refers to the highest category in the human mind’s perception of ultimate reality. The absolute can only be described by the finite intellect as being. In Conclusion, the exploration of the nature of Brahman within Advaita Vedānta reveals profound insights into the fundamental principles of reality as interpreted by this non-dualistic philosophy.

Brahman is not merely a philosophical abstraction but is experienced as the essence of existence, consciousness, and bliss—encapsulated in the concepts of Sat-Chit-Ānanda. The distinction between Nirguna and Saguna Brahman highlights the dynamic interplay between the impersonal and personal aspects of the divine, allowing practitioners to relate to Brahman in varying ways. Furthermore, the role of Māyā, as the veil of illusion, is crucial in understanding why the material world appears as separate from Brahman, and it emphasizes the importance of self-realization and spiritual inquiry in transcending this illusion. Advaita Vedānta asserts that the ultimate goal of life is Mokṣa or liberation, achieved through the recognition of the inherent oneness of Ātman and Brahman.

This philosophical framework not only enriches one's understanding of Indian spirituality but also offers an existential perspective relevant across different contexts. The

teachings of Advaita Vedānta encourage a transformative journey towards self-awareness, ultimately guiding individuals to experience the interconnectedness of all existence. Further research could delve into the practical applications of these teachings in contemporary spiritual practices and their relevance in addressing modern existential questions.

Advaita Vedānta's articulation of Brahman not only enriches the philosophical discourses of metaphysics and spirituality but also resonates with contemporary issues of identity and sustainability. By striving towards an experiential understanding of this non-dualistic truth, individuals may find a pathway to personal peace and a harmonious existence with the world at large. Such insights underscore the timeless relevance of Advaita Vedānta and its potential to contribute to modern philosophical thought and practical life.

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