

## The nature of world according to Advaita Vedānta

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### Abstract

Advaita Vedānta is a branch of Indian philosophy that strongly and logically refutes all theories of Reality other than the Absolute Brahman, the only eternal entity. Shankara is considered to be the best exponent of this philosophy. In such preaching, he has demonstrated his innate supernatural erudition, unparalleled divine power, heartfelt logic and extraordinary diligence. The main goal of Advaita Vedānta is to achieve mokṣa (liberation) through the sense of oneness and identity between the soul of the inquiring seeker and the omnipresent transcendental Brahman. Advaita Vedānta firmly assumes that Brahman alone is true, that this world is transcendently false, and that Jivātmā (individual soul) and Brahman are one and the same. Brahman is one and unique in all states Who exists in all the worlds and all beings as an all-pervaded single entity. Since this doctrine envisages Brahman, beings and the universe as one and indivisible, it is called Advaitaism. This article attempts to explain the nature of Jagat (world) described in Advaitaism and how the existence of the world is completely dependent on Brahman.

### Introduction:

The basic tone of Advaita Vedānta philosophy is expressed in a verse of Shankara:

brahma satyaṃ jaganmithyā jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ |  
anena vedyam sacchāstramiti vedāntaḍḍimaḥ ||

(Shankaracharya, 1981, v. 20. 198).

which means- this world is false and Jivātmā and Brahman are one and the unique. This Jivātmā or Ātman is Paramātmā or Brahman. Brahman is Ekmebādviṭīyam i.e. Brahman is One and Unique in all states. He is truth, everything else is false. In any case, He is not many. And this doctrine of Shankara is called Advaitaism because he imagines this supreme truth Brahman, all lives and this universe as one and indivisible. According to Advaita, the perceptible world is not separate from the unrevealed Brahman; It is based on Brahman, hence Brahman. We

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mistakenly see Him in many forms. This visible world, which is constantly changing in the combination of name and form, is only an illusion.

The essence of Shankara's Advaitic teaching is the union of soul and Brahman. This soul does not mean body, senses, mind and intellect. Rather, it the very conscious entity that lies behind all these things known as I or self who is the constant witness of this universe. This soul is the Supreme Brahman who exists in all beings and in everything in the world as one entity. This self-knowledge cannot be proved, because it is the basis at the root of all proofs. Shruti thus says, "vijñātāram are kena vijānīyāt" (Swami Krishnananda, 1983, v. 2.4.14. 216.) means 'Through what should one know the Knower?' All the proofs are verified by this Knower. So, this self-consciousness is eternal knowledge without a doubt. Although self-consciousness is present in everyone, it is covered by ignorance or Avidyā or Māyā. This ignorance can be destroyed by penance and justice. The nature of the soul will be revealed to the judicious saint only when he completely rejects all inanimate objects in front of him by judging like- I (Self) am not really this gross body, not bodily senses, not mind, not intelligence, not happiness and sorrow, not even anything in the visible world. In this context, the following verse from Shankar's Vivekacūḍamaṇi is relevant:

pañcānāmapī kośānāṃ niṣedhe yuktitaḥ śruteḥ |  
tanniṣedhāvadhī sākṣī bodharūpo'vaśiṣyate ||

(Swami Madhavananda, 1921, v. 210. 94.)

which means- when all the five sheaths have been removed by the logic of the Śruti passages, what remains as the final point of the process is the Witness, the Knowledge Absolute – the Ātman. It will then be understood that only the Brahman is the Self-manifest, by whom this world and all the things of this world are manifested, He is the one in waking, dreaming, and slumbering; and exists in present, past and future as true witnesses in all situations.

**Brahman according to Advaita Vedānta:**

Although the main topic of this article is world, in Advaita Vedānta there is no existence of Jīva and world without Brahman. Therefore, the discussion about the form of Brahman becomes relevant even before the Jīva and the world. According to Shankara, Brahman is One without a second, eternal, Nirguṇa (without attributes) and the Supreme Being. According to him, just as the same sun is reflected in every waterfall and manifests itself in many forms, so there is only Brahman who is present everywhere. In the third chapter of Brahmasutra Commentary, he says:

Just as this lustrous sun (Vivasvan) even though one only, yet, having entered different waters, appears to be many, due to (being reflected in) the limiting adjunct viz. water, even so is this Self (Atma), which is not subject to birth, made to appear as if it is different because of the limiting adjuncts of many bodies. Similarly, this Self (Atma) of all beings, one as it is, is, by residing in different beings, seen as if it is one and many, at one and the same time, like the reflections of the moon in water. (V. M. Apte (trans.) 1960, 588).

### The nature of world according to Advaita Vedānta

There is no existence of anything other than Brahman. Brahman is eternally pure, eternally conscious and eternally liberated. Brahman is beyond the categories of space, time, causation, words, mind and intellect. Brahman is an indefinable reality beyond the reach of all intellectual proofs.

According to Shankara, Brahman is Nirguṇa from the Paramārthika (transcendental) point of view. But from a Byabahārika (practical) point of view, Brahman is Saguṇa i.e., possessing qualities. According to Shankara, the Paramārthika view is true, where Nirguṇa Brahman is the only real entity. Brahman is Nirguṇa when we think of Brahman as having no power or above all attributes. In Advaita, Nirguṇa Brahman is the Svarūpa-lakṣaṇa (eternal or eternal nature) of Brahman. On the other hand, Saguṇa Brahman or Ishvara is the Tatastha-lakṣaṇa (marginal or incidental nature) of Brahman. Nirguṇa Brahman and Saguṇa Brahman are not two different concepts. According to Shankara, there is only Nirguṇa Brahman. In actual fact, there is no Saguṇa Brahman. Nirguṇa Brahman assumed the title of Māyā and appeared as Saguṇa. If Brahman had any quality or attribute, then that Brahman could not be infinite. If it is assumed that Brahman has a certain quality - then it must be admitted that Brahman does not have the quality opposite to that quality. Then Brahman will become a limited entity. That is why Shankara called Nirguṇa Brahman the formless transcendental reality. This Brahman is formless, infinite, non-dual, non-different, self-manifest, the soul of all beings and Satchidānanda (Truth-knowledge-bliss). According to Shankara, the personal God or Saguṇa Brahman created the world through Māyā Śakti. This Māyā Śakti has the power to cover the true form of the real thing and reveal its distorted form. Therefore in the Bhagavad-gītā Kṛṣṇa says, “I never appear to stupid and unintelligent people. To them, I am veiled by my intimate potency Yogamāyā. Therefore, they cannot know my birthless and imperishable form” (*Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, v. 7/25).

From a practical point of view, this Saguṇa Brahman is thought of as the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the world and from this point of view, He is considered the lord of the universe, the companion of the poor, the ocean of mercy, the shelter of orphans and the worshipped god of devotees. Brahman’s Saguṇa Bhāva is only His pastimes or sports. This aspect of Brahman is presented more extensively in Ram Shankar Mishra's discussion-

Brahman is full of all perfections. And to say that Brahman has some purpose in creating the world will mean that it wants to attain through the process of creation something which it has not. And that is impossible. Hence, there can be no purpose of Brahman in creating the world. The world is a mere spontaneous creation of Brahman. It is a Lila, or sport, of Brahman. It is created out of Bliss, by Bliss and for Bliss. Lila indicates a spontaneous sportive activity of Brahman as distinguished from a self-conscious volitional effort. The concept of Lila signifies freedom as distinguished from necessity. (Ram S. Misra 1998, 181).

According to Shankaracharya, ignorance in the form of Māyā is the producer of all dualities. It is from this duality of the living being that all actions take place. Only when duality

is destroyed is the passive soul established in Brahman and the renunciation of the result of action vanishes forever. He then rightly realizes that whatever reality exists, by which all else subsists, is Brahman. Behind all impermanence, He is the one eternal Being, the One Truth of things, Who is hidden in all appearances. That's when such non-dual minded people get the knowledge of Brahman.

**World according to Advaita Vedānta:**

There is a popular saying in Sanskrit about the world- “Jayate gacchati tisthati iva iti jagat”, the essence of which is that what arises, perishes, comes and goes and seems to exist in it is the world. This means that everything in this world is ever-changing, transitory, and subject to destruction and decay. Pointing to the impermanence of all things in the world, Shankara says, the existence of this strange and tricky world is false. The sole cause of its origin, status and destruction is the infinite, omniscient and omnipotent Brahman. The supremacy of the universe over Brahman is due to Māyā. In Advaita, Māyā is the mysterious force of Brahman that misleads us to accept the experiential world as real. Thibaut's translation of Shankara's commentary on Brahmasutra gives a beautiful explanation of the matter-

It is in fact a principle of illusion; the undefinable cause owing to which there seems to exist a material world comprehending distinct individual existences. Being associated with this principle of illusion, Brahman is enabled to project the appearance of the world, in the same way as a magician is enabled by his incomprehensible magical power to produce illusory appearances of animate and inanimate beings. Māyā thus constitutes the upadana, the material cause of the world; or —if we wish to call attention to the circumstance that Māyā belongs to Brahman as a sakti—we may say that the material cause of the world is Brahman in so far as it is associated with Māyā (George Thibaut (Trans.) 1904, Introduction, xxv).

Thus, Māyā has the ability to hide reality which misrepresents or distorts reality. For Shankara, therefore, the phenomenal world is nothing but Māyā, the real shaper of this world. However, calling this world a lie does not mean the non-existence of the world. The world is false means that this world is relative, changing and consequential. In Advaita, the word ‘world is false’ does not mean completely false like flowers in the sky or like the horns of a hare. It has a relative existence. It is temporarily true for now but disappears when the true knowledge of Brahman arises. In other words, it exists momentarily but is not real from an absolute point of view.

In order to understand the true nature of the world, Advaita Vedānta postulates three types of sattva (existence), which it calls- Pāramārthika (real or transcendental), Vyāvahārika (pragmatic) and Prātibhāsika (apparent or illusory). From this viewpoint of Advaita, Brahman is Pāramārthika Sattvā (absolute reality), Jagat is Vyāvahārika Sattvā (relative reality) and dream object is Prātibhāsika Sattvā (apparent reality). The Nirviśeṣa (undifferentiated or indeterminate) aspect of Brahman is Pāramārthika Sattva, as His true nature. The other aspect of Brahman is His Vyāvahārika Sattvā which is imposed on Him by Avidyā as the phenomenal

### The nature of world according to Advaita Vedānta

world and is therefore not real. In Advaita, only the Pāramārthika Brahman is the ultimate reality. He is the cause of all beings and matter and the only representative of the universe. As the other two are His phenomenal manifestations, Advaita negates all the existence of objects of the world. For Shankar, the practical or empirical world is sufficiently real for all practical purposes, however, to him, it is not ultimately real. It appears unreal (false) only when compared with Brahman. The world and all its objects are conditioned by space and time and regulated by cause-effect relationships. On the contrary, Brahman is not caused by anything and transcends time, space, and causality. In his commentary on Brahmasutra, he argues thus-

That omniscient omnipotent cause from which proceed the origin, subsistence, and dissolution of this world-which world is differentiated by names and forms, contains many agents and enjoyers, is the abode of the fruits of actions, these fruits having their definite places, times, and causes, and the nature of whose arrangement cannot even be conceived by the mind,-that cause, we say, is Brahman (George Thibaut (Trans.) 1904, Introduction, xxv).

Thus, Shankara denies the existence of world in order to highlight its dependent nature, and not to deny its practical existence. If we think deeply about his view, we can easily understand that anything that has a beginning has a dependent nature, because it owes its existence to its cause. Moreover, anything that has a beginning must have an end, and therefore must be finite and temporary. So, anything in this world has a dependent existence as a cause and cannot exist forever because eventually, it becomes one with the source from which it originates. From this point of view, Shankara falsifies everything in this world and accepts only Pāramārthika as the Ever-Existing Reality That has no beginning or end.

According to Shankara, Brahman is not only the efficient cause of the world but also the material cause. All the quantities of clay can be known by a lump of clay because all the modification is a verbal distinction. The modification of clay like pot, plate, or jar is nothing more than some names derived from sentences, while the truth is that it is clay merely. Similarly, only Brahman is true and this world is false. Just as there is no separate entity such as pot etc. without the basic material clay- they are not separate objects, they are only different states, again just as the childhood, youth etc. of the same Devdatta are only different states of Devdatta but none of them is true, only Devdatta is true, just like this the production, existence, maintenance, expansion, decay and destruction of the world are from Brahman. This world was unmanifested before the creation, but in the state of creation that unmanifest has been manifested or useable by the dual designations of name and form. Shankara in the Brahmasutra commentary says-If it is argued that the effect did not exist before creation, since it is declared (in the Upanishads) as "non-existent", then we say, no, because from the complementary portion it is known that the word is used from the point of view of distinguishing characteristics (*Brahma-Sutra Shankara-Bhashya*, v. 2.1.17.).

As we always live in this world, everything we experience here is only at the Vyavahārika level. At this level, anything we experience directly through the senses is real, but

only as long as our experience lasts. In Bhagavad Gita, we see ‘nāsatō vidyatē bhāvō nābhāvō vidyatē sataḥ’ (*Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, 2.16.) where the word ‘Āsatō’ means unreal, which does not actually exist. Again, ‘Sataḥ’ refers to the transcendental reality, which is the only truly existing and can never go out of existence. In fact, Brahman appears as the earth under the influence of his mysterious power, known as Māyā or Ajanana. This truth is revealed in Shankara’s Upadahasasri - Brahman is omnipresent like ether, possessing infinite energy, free from all souls, hunger etc. and free from appearance and disappearance. This Supreme Brahman being possessed of inconceivable power is the originator of the imperishable Nama-form by existence alone. This immutable name-form is different in essence from Brahman who is the seed of the world, indescribable as this or that, upon which the world has taken its form (*Upadahasasri*, v. 2.1.18.).

**Māyā: the foundation of the pragmatic world:**

The doctrine of Māyā holds a pivotal position in the foundation of Advaita-Vedānta philosophy. Although the concept of Māyāvad is observed in the Vedas and Upaniṣhads, Shankara and his followers tried to establish this Māyā firmly with the help of logic. The power which is capable of causing the impossible, which envelops Brahman and imposes world phenomena on it, is called ignorance, Avidyā or Māyā in Shankara’s Advaita Vedānta. It is essentially because of this Māyā that Nirguṇa Brahma becomes Saguṇa Ishwar, the source of goodness and becomes the cause of the world. Māyā is called an epithet of Brahman because it imposes its own actions on Brahman.

In Advaita, this Māyā-Śakti of Brahman originates from falsehood or Avidyā. Brahman as described in the Upaniṣhads is the only truth and everything in the strange world is false - these are only apparent entities. It is the one true Brahman who manifests himself in the form of the body, the senses, the mind, the soul, and every external object that exists. Therefore, all things and organisms, regardless of the seemingly small and large, appearing in this world, are identical, one and unique to Brahman. Aitareya Upaniṣhad declares that:

sarvaṃ tatprajñānetraṃ prajñāne pratiṣṭhitam  
prajñānetro lokaḥ prajñā pratiṣṭhā prajñānaṃ brahma

(*Aitareya Upanishad*, v. 3.1.3).

which means-all this is produced by Consciousness, is supported by Consciousness and rests in Consciousness. That Consciousness is Brahman. While the only true Brahman exists everywhere, explaining the apparent conflict between the various sensations and experiences of our senses in our daily life, Shankar says, this diversity of the world is Māyā. Whenever we have knowledge of Brahman in its proper form, these varieties do not exist, and therefore there is no real basis for the existence of this multi-coloured world. It is an illusion like seeing a snake on a string in the dark. This error is for illusion. This primordial Māyā is the cause of all manifold visions and it is because of this Māyā that Brahman is mistaken for the world. It is because of this Māyā that the living beings consider themselves to be attached to the body, the

### The nature of world according to Advaita Vedānta

senses etc. Gambhirananda, translating verse 1.iii.12 of Shankara's Kāṭha Upanisad commentary, writes that:

Alas, how unfathomable, inscrutable, and variegated is this Māyā, that every creature, though in reality identical with the supreme Entity, and is instructed as such, does not grasp the fact, "I am the supreme Self", while even without being told, he accepts as his Self the non-selves, viz the aggregate of body and senses, under the idea, "I am the son of such a one", though these (latter) are objects of perception (and are hence not his selves) like pots etc. ! Verily, it is through the Māyā of the supreme Being, that every man moves, again and again (through birth and death)- (Swami Gambhirananda (Trans.). 1937,162-163).

Māyā is the Upadhi (limiting adjunct) of Brahman that hides His essence and appears as the highest manifestation of the Absolute. The limiting adjunct is imposed on the living being and because of association with the limiting adjunct the living being thinks of himself as a doer, consumer etc. Although the limiting adjunct has nothing to do with the soul itself, the living beings are still bound by Māyā and consider themselves subject to birth, death, happiness and sorrow.

According to Shankar the subject of illusion produced by Māyā is neither 'Sat' (real) nor 'Asat' (unreal), nor is it a compound of 'Sat-asat', but different from 'Sat-asat' which is indefinable. This illusion is sometimes variable, sometimes erosive and sometimes magical. It surpasses human understanding, it stands above all proportion, and it even controls the reasoning power of man. If this illusory visible world were 'Sat', it would have existed forever. By 'Sat' we mean 'time-absolute existence' irrespective of past, present or future. The world created by Māyā does not transcend time i.e. it did not exist millions of years ago, it exists now and it will cease to exist at some point in the future. We know that during 'Suṣupti' or dreamless sleep our five senses are absorbed in the mind and the mind in the soul. At this time we do not perceive the world. If this illusory world was really true then we could perceive this world even during 'Suṣupti'. Again, when the world appears before us under the influence of direct evidence, it cannot be called completely 'Asat', because if it were 'Asat', it would not appear before us; As the son of the barren never appears. Again 'Sat' and 'Asat' are opposite to each other, so that too is impossible. Hence Māyā is to be distinguished from 'Sat-asat' and by reason of coherence, we are compelled to conclude that this visible world is 'Anirvachanīya' (indescribable). Shankara in his Vivekachūḍāmonī explains the matter succinctly:

sannāpyasannāpyubhayātmikā no  
bhinnāpyabhinnāpyubhayātmikā no |  
sāṅgāpyanaṅgā hyubhayātmikā no  
mahādbhutānirvacanīyarūpā (Swami Madhavananda, 192, v. 109. 45).

This Māyā is neither existent nor non-existent nor partaking of both characters; neither the same as Brahman nor different from Brahman nor both; neither composed of parts nor an indivisible whole nor both. She is most wonderful and cannot be described in words.

According to Advaita Vedānta, Māyā is the cause of this world and the world is the result of Māyā. In reality, this illusory world is completely real as long as we are under the influence of Māyā. When the dominion of Māyā passes from us by judgment, the One Brahman reveals Himself to us with His eternal existence. To a sage enlightened by Brahman, the external world is like mirage water which cannot quench his thirst. He ignores this illusory appearance of the world to enjoy Brahman, the abode of supreme truth, peace and bliss. When man's dualistic mind is gone and established in self-knowledge, he sees nothing but Brahman in this world. In the Brihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣhad sage Yājñavalkya told Maitreyī this truth - When duality is realized through ignorance one sees one another, one smells one another, but when everything is identified as self, how can one see another or smell another (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, v. 4.5.15)? Shankara opines that the way in which Brahman may appear to be changeable or divisible or transformable is similar to the way in which a rope may appear to be a snake in light darkness. The multiplicity of appearances in the empirical world may be mistaken for Brahman, just as a rope may mistakenly appear to us as a snake (*Brahma-Sutra Shankara-Bhashya*, v. 2,1,14). The rope does not transform into a snake, but it appears to us as a snake due to our ignorance (Avidyā). A closer look at the rope reveals that the snake disappears without a trace. Another example can be given - just as the sun is reflected in the water and appears to be many, similarly Brahman is reflected and becomes the universe along with the living beings.

**Conclusion:**

The basic tenet of Advaita Vedānta is the ultimate elimination of the duality existing in the world between cause and matter. It is an abstract concept that attempts to explain how the impersonal Supreme Brahman has transformed into His phenomenal world creation and multifaceted personality. In this sense, Brahman is the one and only Absolute Reality, who exists in infinite consciousness free from all attributes. He is a breathless entity imperceptible to the human senses, who lies behind the name-form of everything in the world around us. Therefore, the external world that arises in the presence or absence of our mind and senses is the manifestation of that Brahman - mere appearance, form or illusion. Shankara's attempt is to generalize the entire external world into one entity - the one true Brahman who manifests himself in this world in various forms - body, senses, mind, soul and every external object that exists. He is the true and only reality upon whose existence the universe is born, grows and dies. He is the source and foundation of all things upon which all things arise. The world that appears to be real will eventually become unreal when the judicious sage knows that the Reality of eternal Brahman remains at the higher level of the infinite consciousness of his intellect. Only at this higher level of consciousness, this world seems illusory. The supersensible experience of the Absolute Reality is known as immediate and indirect. As long as we are in the dream state, we see all the infinite variety of creatures! When the fleeting dream vanishes in the dawn of awakening, the dreamy object becomes illusory like the Flower of the sky. Similarly, if the dream of this worldly awakening is broken once or if one attains greater



### The nature of world according to Advaita Vedānta

awakening in the ocean of Brahman considering this world as illusory, then the awakening of this present world will appear as a dream.

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