A Misconception about the Nature of Self in Hindu Philosophy: A Comparative Critique of Śaṅkara's Strategy and Foundationalism

Purushottama Bilimoria

Contrary to popular belief, there really is not just one single idea of the self in the Hindu tradition, rather there is a variety of competing ideas that the tradition has had to deal with, often striving to bring them together under some unitary conception. And this is never achieved without massive conceptual difficulties. One could even argue that the conception of self that emerges in Indian thought is at its core a highly paradoxical one: because here the self is denied at one level, while at another level its existence is asserted. However, much of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Oriental scholarship and latter-day popularist (nay, universalist) neo-Vedānta movements merely served to obscure the complexity and diversity of the idea of the self in the broad spectrum of Hindu beliefs, let alone in the broader spectrum of the Indian philosophic tradition. Professor Eric Sharpe in his comparative reflections on Hindu religiosity often remarked critically on the universalist tendencies of much of eighteenth and nineteenth century Hindu thinking and its derivative forms, such as the Brahmo Samaj, the Besant-inspired theosophical movement, unitarian and spiritualist protagonists based in the subcontinent, and the nationalist philosophes.

In this essay I shall explore the conception of the self as it emerges in a prominent school within the Hindu tradition, namely the Śaṅkara-Vedānta school, with reference also to its critical opponents.

A tension that I am particularly interested in arises from a hunch that the denial of the self in the face of a form of life might be unwittingly geared towards the aggrandisement of the self and one's self alone at another level; and conversely, the assertion of a self in some other, albeit trans-empirical sense, may well be matched by a form of life that aims to obliterate any sense of the 'I', 'ego' and the 'other', resulting virtually in the death of the *self* altogether. My contention is that the answer often given to the question(s): 'Is there a self? What is it?' is embedded in a discursive formation which turns invariably on the kind of attitude one has learnt to adopt against the background of a long and hoary tradition. In other words, the reference point is not necessarily the

result of one's own inner explorations (which might be thought too subjective anyway) as much as what one has come to 'know' through a longer process of the community's or tradition's preoccupations with the problem. Space does not allow us to consider in great depth the antecedent roots which might give some clues to the problematic and the dichotomous theses evolved out of the early though perhaps hazy insights of the (philosophically untutored) seers.[1] We shall attempt a brief sketch anyway.

I. Self in the Vedas

The earliest literary conception of the self in the Indian tradition is to be found in the Vedas, more specifically in the hymns of the *Ṛgveda* (circa 2,500 BCE) The *Ṛgveda* virtually begins with a puzzle about being or the very facticity of existence, almost as to question the ground of existence itself. In the cosmogonic hymn known as *Nāsadīya-sūkta*, the bard wonders what was there at the beginning, when there was neither existence nor non-existence, and sums up with a cryptic remark that perhaps we would never know the how and why of the world's coming to be! This hymn may well capture the earliest expression of a sceptical tendency in regard to the ultimate questions on the nature of the world and the self that looms large within the Indian tradition as part of its philosophical conscience. It at least states that existence, human existence included, appears to be problematic, i.e., there is a non-intelligible residue at the root of our experience which no inquiry may be able to answer.[2] This idea of non-being, *asat*, (literally non-existent), recurs in later literature, and is made the impersonal ground of *sat* or being itself.

The second important notion that occurs in the *Ṛgveda* is that of *puruṣa* or the image of a person. This idea of person writ large so as to constitute the body of the universe is traced to the famous hymn of the Cosmic Person, *Puruṣa Sūkta (Ṛgveda* 10.130). The grand sacrifice of the primeval cosmic giant (*ādi puruṣa)* by the

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1 Some of these issues have been explored, and hence a slight overlap, in my essay entitled 'Śaṅkara's attempted reconciliation of You and I - *yuṣmadasmadsamanvaya*' in *Relativism, Suffering, and Beyond: Bimal K. Matilal Memorial Volume*, eds P. Bilimoria and J. N. Mohanty, Delhi, 1996. I have also dealt with some of these issues in my monograph, *The self and its destiny in Hinduism*, Victoria, 1990.

2 *Ṛgveda*, trans. Wendy O'Flaherty, Harmondsworth, 1981, pp. 25-26.

gods results in the dispersal of the dismembered parts that thence constitute the cosmos and the human being. (One part of the Puruṣa remains immortal.)

This important signifier of *'puruṣa'* is never far off from Hindu speculations, from Sāṃkhya psychology to the ground plan for temple architecture, and the deepest metaphysical critiques towards outlining the parameters of authentic personal existence or *personhood.* But the uncanny truth is that the perspective has invariably been cosmological (as against being epistemological, psychological, ontological, metaphysical, or logical and so on). It has scarcely condescended to the anthropological, much less sociological transfiguration, almost reaching messianic proportions (for example, *avatāra* as the limit of the supreme person in earthly manifestations). The self remains cocooned in the security of cosmological attire, and the uncertain questions of philosophical dialectics are not allowed to surface, until perhaps the time of the Upaniṣads over and against the stealthy rise to popularity of the *śramaṇic* or quasi-renunciate traditions.

There are various other terms by which the self is referred to, but the one that emerges most prominently is the term *ātman. Puruṣa* itself changes in connotation to signify the principle of existence within each living being - gods, humans and animals alike. The term *ātman* more specifically is used to refer to this universal principle in human beings, while *jīva* occasionally is used to refer to the putative self in embodiment. The *Ṛgveda* gave a beautiful analogy of two birds perched on a branch watching each other, one immortal and the other mortal. This symbolism is taken up later in the Upaniṣads as well.

II. The Upaniṣadic *Brahman* and the unity of all being

The privileged relation between concepts of *ātman* and the ordinary experience of the putative self is however threatened in the evolving Jaina-Buddhist conception of no-self, which continues to recall the tension between *sat* and *asat* (being and non-being) set up in the *Ṛgveda.* In the Upaniṣads the backdrop of non-being or *asat* plays a rather significant role in the development of the idea of the putative self, which is later to inform much of Hindu theo-philosophy. Thus we come across passages that declare: 'In the beginning this [all] was non-being (*asat*). Therefrom being (*sat)*

was produced', (*Taittirīya Up.* II.7)[1] and 'In the beginning this [all] was *asat*; it became *sat*' (*Chāndogya Up.* III.19.1). The primacy accorded to non-being in the Vedas appears not to have been lost on the later seers, who increasingly drew upon this insight to sharpen their view of human individuality and its ultimate destiny.

But at the same time, the idea of the unity of being at all three levels of the individual, social and cosmic existence, hinted at in the *Puruṣa Sūkta*, is also developed further in terms now of a metaphysical thesis which seeks to relate *ātman*, increasingly identified with *sat*, which in turn is elevated as the ultimate principle of existence behind the facade of the all-beguiling reality. This is called *Brahman*, literally, the 'Word' or 'mantric formula' that, for want of a better *nomen*, evokes the transcendental principle of unity. Curiously then, in the Vedas *brahman* denoted an encoding formula as well as naming one who composes or repeats this magical mantra-like signifier of the sacred signified (*Tait. Up.,* III 10, 4-5; *Chānd. Up.* I.7.1). But it also had the connotation of being a 'sublime power' or the force that lies behind such word and wisdom, and the rites performed to accomplish this end. In due course *Brahman* came to represent the greatness of being, the supreme power and principle behind all things; and *Brahman* stood as the highest reality, in which gods merge, and all else (the world, humans and creatures) are seen as the many manifestations of the one supreme reality. In the Upaniṣads there is an overwhelming tendency to identify the *ātman* with *Brahman*, as though to say that there is ultimately no distinction or difference between the real self of human existence and whatever being qua existent there ultimately is *(sat)*, or is not qua non-existent *(asat)*. The sense of duality is brushed aside as being only 'as if', or 'as it were duality' (*dvaitam iva*) *(Brh.Up.*II.4,14). Later commentators however have read and described the relation between *ātman* and *Brahman* in quite different ways; and there has been no unanimity on just what the nature of *ātman* is. In the so-called lesser Upaniṣads, no assumptions are being made about its absoluteness in respect of its being-nature or consciousness. Indeed, much like Kant later on in the West, the philosophers of the Upaniṣadic ilk seriously wondered whether it was at all possible to pass beyond the limits of ordinary experience to say

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[1] Texts for the Upaniṣads are from S. Radhakrishnan, trans., *The Principal Upaniṣads*, London, 1975. Abbreviations used: *Tait = Taittirīya; Chānd. = Chāndogya; Brh. = Bṛhadāraṇyaka; Up. = Upaniṣads.*

anything definitive about that which might be supposed to transcend the ordinary; thus, the mind returns with words unable to cross the *mūlamāyā*-bourne.

It should be evident from the brief survey that the individual self that starts simply as a remnant of a primeval sacrificial performance of the gods, having no autonomous status in the *Ṛgveda*, and riddled with self-doubt if not a fissure or closure qua non-being, gradually emerges into a powerful symbol for the unity of the individual identity, the social being and the ultimate as well. However, at some deeper and transcendental level, its full nature remains aloof to human grasping or conceptualisation. Much emphasis is placed on the harmony and desired equilibrium between the three levels of the individual, social and the cosmic. The cosmological structure becomes the founding *metaphysical* impulse, prefiguring as the motivation in later philosophical development, particularly in the Upaniṣads, and culminating with Śaṅkara, as I shall show. The emergent concept of the self reaches beyond the limited and conditioned existence of the individual, or the embodied person, variously rendered as the *jīva*. In this imagined higher self the individual may find a greater and more sustaining meaning. And so, in identifying the *ātman* with *Brahman*, as the Upaniṣads begin to do, the self achieves an exalted elevation to another level or order of being, indeed in its absolute identity with *sat* or Being, itself, similar in some respects to Hegel's attempt much later to locate the ego in the historical self-realisation of the Spirit Absolute. But a shadow continues to haunt and threaten to rock the foundational impulse in respect of its 'other', the alterity of *-sat*, i.e. *asat*, which too vies for its own autonomous status and recognition. Thus there shimmered an incipient reaction against the totalising tendencies of *sat*, and various alternatives were proposed or championed.

One such reaction came from the quarters of the Buddha (who articulated and extended the *śramaṇic-Jaina* disquiet with the *Brāhmaṇical* sacrificial excesses). One of the more damaging charges was that the *Brāhmaṇical*-Hindu conception of *ātman* betrays an assumption about substantiality, when in fact there appears to be no such substantial presence within us (as Hume, centuries later, also argued). The Buddhists took up this criticism and developed a counter thesis, according to which the *puruṣa* is denied.

The way that the monistic tradition of Hinduism resolved the problematic of a universal *being* and the differential sense that people have of an individual and substantial self was to say that

ātman was ultimately real and the phenomenal world (*jagat*) and the individual were illusory in nature (*māyābhāva*). This is somewhat akin to the transcendental turn that occurred with Descartes in the West, and it is precisely the line of thinking that the eighth century philosopher Śaṅkara championed. Śaṅkara expresses doubt about the nature of the self either as *jīva*, or as a stream of impermanent consciousness-moments; he is all for giving up the idea of the discrete *jīva* altogether (B.S. II.2.10-20, 30-40, III.2.).[1] But in doing this he at once relegates an entire tradition of richly developed conceptions of the self in its otherness to a state of oblivion. And why does he do that? My hypothesis is that Śaṅkara was fearful of the looming legacy of *asat* and its constant wager on *sat* in traditional philosophical development (notably in Buddhist dialectic). So if only he could annihilate one side of the equation which the *Ṛgveda* had mistakenly conceived of, *sat* would reign supreme; but to achieve this, Śaṅkara would almost have to empty *sat* of all its contents, such that there could be no description possible of it; its identification and re-identification must be entirely analytic. Moreover, if it is at some deep level undifferentiable from *asat* itself, i.e. difference is itself swallowed up as it were - but a matter that must to the very end remain concealed in the theory - then the reality of self as *ātman* could be no more in doubt than the truth of the proposition A = A. In other words, Śaṅkara had discovered both (or perhaps voices its first acknowledgment within the Vedānta tradition) analyticity, and the power and persuasiveness of the concept of nothingness of the self implicated in the Ṛgvedic articulation of *asat* or non-being. In the remainder of the essay, I shall endeavour to demonstrate my thesis by examining the various subtle moves and linguistic tropes Śaṅkara engineers in his commentarial work on the *Brahmasūtra*, the supposed aphoristic gem of the wisdom teachings of the vast and unwieldy Upaniṣads. In my critical investigation into

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1 B.S. = *Brahmasūtra*, and the reference is specifically to Śaṅkara's commentary or *Bhāṣya* (B.S.B.) on the text with his own Introduction, variously called, *Samanvaya* or 'Reconciliation through proper interpretation', and the *Adhyāsa* Meditation, which I prefer. Texts for the *Bhāṣya* is from *Complete Works of Śrī Śaṅkarāchārya in the original Sanskrit*, vol. VII, Madras, 1983. With interpolations of Vācaspati Miśra in his *Bhāmatī* commentary on the BSB, ed. and trans. C. Kunhan Raja and S. S. Suryanarayana Sastri, Adyar, 1933. Additional reference to, *Brahmasūtra-Catuḥsutrī The First Four Aphorisms of Brahmasūtra along with Śaṅkarācārya's Commentary*, Pandit Hari Dutt Sharma, Poona, 1967.

Śaṅkara's theorising, I shall refer also and compare his moves or presuppositions with those of some seminal thinkers in the Western (Continental) tradition.

III. Śaṅkara's Transcendental Turn

The Cartesian turn in India then occurs with Śaṅkara, in his celebrated *Adhyāsa* Meditation or the introduction to *Brahmasūtra* where he is concerned to reconcile differing views through argument. It worries the youthful *sannyāsin* that there is a spate of views on the nature of the self, and he considers some candidates: body alone with the attribute of intelligence; the inner organ; a momentary idea; nothingness; transmigrating entity as agent and enjoyer; and the Lord as inward enjoyer. This is about it. In an important way these reflect, in part, prevailing cultural conceptions, and they do not exhaust the philosophical range, actual and imagined. For instance, the Jaina conception is not canvassed; the Sāṃkhya conception comes in for attack much later; the Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā conceptions are bypassed, glancing over at the conception of self as the other, conceived and constituted in an inseparable relation through the image of the other, or alterity. Indeed, the non-self, the 'other' in its utter *otherness, totaliter alter*, and the possibility of its non-being or inauthenticity echoing in one's self-image, is what appears to have troubled Śaṅkara most, and hence motivated him to retreat to the security of the self of some pristine or *sui generis* conception. Charging that these other views are based on fallacious arguments, he proceeds to offer what he considers to be the truly unassailable position.

So what is his argument? Śaṅkara develops an argument in his Introduction before he proceeds to comment directly on the texts of the *Brahmasūtra*. And so in this regard the argument stands apart from anything he might say later in his commentary. He is obviously at pains to address a contention which the seers and sages would have missed or which might have arisen closer to his own era. One does not have to stretch one's imagination to guess who were his adversaries. Indeed, he gives us a few clues as he goes on to consider likely objections from the *Śūnyavādin* camp. And here he skilfully sets out an agenda for a whole gamut of speculation and theorising that has gone on since, in the Indian philosophy of religion. His basic thesis is enunciated in the very first paragraph of his Introduction, thus:

> The contents circumscribed by the dual concepts of 'you' (*yuṣmat*) and 'I' (*asmat*), namely, the object (*viṣaya*) and subject (*viṣayin*) respectively, being by their nature as contrary as light is to darkness, cannot reasonably have any identity; this being established, it is even less reasonable that there be identity between their attributes.[1]

Two species of doubt are being entertained and responded to. The first has to do with the use of the personal pronouns in the first and second persons respectively, viz. *asmat* and *yuṣmat*, which we could render as 'I' (or occasionally, the royal 'we') and 'thou' respectively. Śaṅkara juxtaposes the two pronouns to mark absolute contrast and difference between two features of experience, which admittedly otherwise would be better served by the pronouns *aham* and *idam*, i.e. 'I' and 'that' or 'it', which by definition exemplify two extremities. Śaṅkara immediately fills out the two pronouns with the further similes of light and darkness. But notice the ingenious alignments: *asmatpratyaya* or *aham*, the first person designation is the subject, and there can be no dispute about this, for 'I' (or 'we') is self-referentially taken to be the subject; *yuṣmat* ('you'), on the other hand, is intended to stand for the object (*viṣaya, artha*). Śaṅkara, following a common linguistic convention, is intent on universalising the you-concept (*yuṣmatpratyaya*) as objects-in-general, i.e. anything and everything that is other than the exclusive 'I'.

By stretching a literary licence he grants 'you' the position of the object-concept in a subject-predicate relation. One might well suspect that the model employed is not really a linguistic one at all, but a deeply ontological one, as when there is an attempt to forge or perhaps simply to articulate a relationship between the 'I' of oneself and the 'thou' of the other (as, for example, in one's petition to a god). It would be a betrayal of one's emotional sentiment if the '*yuṣmat*' in these evocations could be substituted by *viṣaya* or 'object' simpliciter, in an inert sense, and one would be charged with mixing up levels of being, if not also making a category mistake. One suspects again, that Śaṅkara's scepticism of the possibility of any kind of identity in worldly experience from one's bodily ego-sense to the presence of the other (i.e., you) is rooted in the first instance in the absence of such an identification in the very encounter of I and the other. *Indeed, you and I must be*

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1 *Yuṣmadasmatpratyayagocarayor viṣayaviṣayinos tamaḥprakāśavad viruddhasvabhāvayor itaretarabhāvānupapattau siddhāyām; taddharmānām api sutarām itaretarabhāvānupapattiḥ. Ibid.*, p. 1.

as far apart as light is from darkness, Śaṅkara's remarks would suggest.

IV. Comparative critique

Drawing on a comparativist perspective from outside the Indian tradition, Martin Buber narrates how since Aristotle the human being comes to speak of himself in the third person: he attains consciousness only as 'he' (or 'she') not as 'I'. The self is no longer a solitary 'sojourner in a foreign land like the Platonic man, but given his own dwelling-place in the house of the world, not, indeed, in one of the highest storeys, but not in one of the lower, either, rather in the respectable middle'.[1] He goes on with his tracing of the self's evolution in the Western conceptual world, by noting that having stretched out as far beyond as he could, from one age of solitude to the next, 'man reaches a condition when he can no longer stretch his hands out from his solitude to meet a divine form. That is at the basis of Nietzsche's saying, 'God is dead'.[2] Thus moving away from the erstwhile preoccupation with the solitary, alienated, self-centred conception of the person, Buber in his own philosophical anthropology, opens up an unusually large space for the 'other', and replaces the question about the essence of human being with the fresh question of his relation to the human world, especially the relation to the 'other', who he refers to as 'thou'. Given this expansive vision of the 'other', Buber would argue that Śaṅkara is entirely misguided in thinking that even the most casual meeting of you and I is fissured in the way light is from darkness, that there is that gaping asymmetry that Śaṅkara presupposes in his mixed metaphors. Indeed if anything there is reciprocity and it is in the space between the 'I' and 'thou' that there is a reflection of and therefore the possibility of transcending to the inner truth of the other's being, which is none other than the immanent spark of divine nature. There is no ground therefore for this unfounded suspicion of the unequal status or the irreconcilable separation of 'I' and 'you' [*Vous*], in the way that is assumed with the primary frame of 'I-It', which considers the other as a putative object. This

1 Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man,* New York, 1975, pp. 126 ff. See also his *I and Thou,* trans. R. G. Smith, Edinburgh, 1987, pp. 15-18; and Buber, 'Elements of the Interhuman', in his *The Knowledge of Man,* trans. by R. G. Smith and M. Friedman, London, 1965, pp. 79, 85.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 167.

frame belies a metaphysics in which the world is considered merely as having a subject-object structure. I have some 'thing' - an It - as my object. Furthermore, 'It' can just as easily be replaced with the terms 'He' or 'She', when I regard people as objects; and this is a wholly one-sided relation as the 'It' is entirely dependent on my action and experience of the object, as *It*. One doesn't have a dialogue with 'It', as one does with a 'Thou', while recognising and accepting the otherness of that person. By collapsing the 'You' with 'It', or not acceding to their difference, Śaṅkara has caused the tiniest possible spark of the spirit in the other to be become *spiritus absconditus*, or *ātmakabhāva*.

Emmanuel Levinas, the great French-Jewish thinker who recently died in Paris, took Buber's seminal insights into the inexorability of the 'thou', which underscores the care and responsibility of one-person-for-the-other, as the basic category of being human, moved it out of the tyranny of egoism with its totalisation of self-being, and evolved a profound ontology of the self in, as it were, the 'eye of the other'. He takes Buber's starting point as underscoring a relation of reciprocity, equality or equity between the *thou* that the *I* solicits.[1] Here he notices an immense ethical ramification for the human condition. No one in this century, or perhaps ever before, barring maybe the Buddha, emphasised more the interminable obligation or relatedness to the *other* than Levinas has. The face-to-face presentation of the other exceeds all idea of the other in me, almost making the right of the other to exist as a primary act of being itself. Moreover, the knowledge of the other is intimately tied to the sense of transcendence or what Levinas calls the 'presence of the Infinite'.[2]

Consequently Levinas would argue that the relation of the 'I' and 'thou', even when the latter is taken in its most exalted height or transcendentally, as the Infinite reaching out to me only in relation to the other, is at base therefore a social relation. As it has been said, 'For Levinas, there is something about the other - the person opposite - which I cannot grasp. This alterity of the other calls my being into question. It informs me of my freedom and also

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1 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside The Subject*, trans. Machale B. Smith, Stanford, 1994, p. 43.

2 *The Levinas Reader*, ed. and introduction by Sean Hand, p. 5. The quote cited by Hand is from Levinas' 'Beyond Intentionality' in *Philosophy in France Today*, Alan Montefiore ed., Cambridge, 1983, pp. 112-13.

of my responsibility toward other humans'.[1] This is formidable challenge to the kind of other-unregard and its ultimate elimination in one's own self-presence that Śaṅkara is committed to. But Śaṅkara would presumably stand his ground, arguing the 'I' exists for its own sake, for *my own sake;* and so as far as he is concerned the 'you' is not of the same order as the transcendental presence.[2] It follows that, if in the meeting of two subjectivities there cannot be that degree of identification, sufficient to dissolve differences, or bridge the chasm, then the possibility of complete identification of a subjective reference with an objective reference would seem to be even less likely. I want to return to this point in a moment after we have examined and remarked on the second doubt that is entertained and dealt with in the passage cited.

Then how does one explain the apparent identification that does occur in ordinary discourse? This is Śaṅkara's famous response:

> Accordingly, the transimposition (*adhyāsa*)[3] of the object, represented by the concept 'you' - and of its properties on the subject, which is of the nature of consciousness *(cidātmaka)*, represented by the concept 'I' - as well as the converse, the subject and its properties on the object can only be said to be an illusion (*mithyā*).[4]

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1 See interesting discussion vis-à-vis Levinas, in Andrew Kelly, 'Reciprocity and the Height of God: A Defence of Buber against Levinas', *Sophia* (Journal of cross-cultural philosophy of religion), vol. 34, no. 1, 1995, pp. 66-79.

2 See discussion in the form of a dialogue in Śaṅkara's *Upadeśasahasri*, translation and introduction by S. Mayeda as *A Thousand Teachings*, Albany, New York, 1992, Prose Part II. #64, p. 238: 'If I am merely the composite of the body and so on, then I am non-conscious, so I exist for another's sake; consequently, the mutual superimposition of body and *Ātman* is not effected by me. If I am the highest *Ātman* different from the composite [of the body and so on], then I am conscious, so I exist for my own sake; consequently, the superimposition [of body] which is the seed of every calamity is effected upon the *Ātman* by me who am conscious'.

3 Contrary to established practice I find it less persuasive to translate *adhyāsa* as 'superimposition', I prefer 'transimposition' as this term is more restricted than superimposition and conveys better the idea of displacing a psychical element A with B.

4 *ity ataḥ asmatpratyayagocare viṣayini cidātmake yuṣmatpratyayagocarasya viṣayasya taddharmāṇāṃ cādhyāsaḥ*

We notice here a shift away from the question-begging issue of identification to that of transimposition, and the adversary appears to be persuading Śaṅkara to forego this possibility as well, for if identity is not possible then any other kind of process which might lead to mutual identification should be rejected as well. Śaṅkara is cunning, for he acknowledges its incoherency, but only to press home the point that the very stated 'illusion' is what we might be looking for in explaining human apprehension of the world. It is, he says, given in human conventional praxis that there is false understanding owing to our inability to discriminate adequately between two entities (namely, subject and object) and their properties in their very difference. This, he says, accounts for the ubiquitous tendency to mutually transimpose one set upon the other; and it is this that forges a union (*mithunīkaraṇa*) of what is real (*satya)* with what is non-real (*anṛta),* illustrated in speech-acts as 'I am this', or 'This is mine'. The 'I' in a given experience can have no real identifying reference to 'you' or to 'this' for all such references are to the non-self, while 'I' alone achieves reference to the self, and there can be no significant correlation between the two polar opposite referents, just as darkness is torn apart from light.

Śaṅkara therefore opines that the identification of self with non-self is an erroneous disposition as it is caused by ignorance (*avidyā*), the *tertium quid,* which conceals the self, the undisclosed witness in the 'I'. The concealment prevents the apprehension of difference.

Two analogies are drawn from people's experience: viz. one moon appearing as two, and the regular illusion of a piece of nacre appearing as the absent silver. The several versions of the supposed prevailing theory that it is the properties of one object which are transferred upon the other (in either direction) are qualified and set aside because they are all prolix and make too many untenable assumptions. It looks more to be the case that the substrate of one, even though it is not given in the immediate environment of the perception, is in its entirety transferred or transimposed upon the substrate of the object given but not properly cognised in perception. Thus 'silver' is as it were lifted and transferred upon the 'nacre'. But where does 'silver' come from if it is not there outside? It comes from memory (*smṛti*). That is all very well as long as there is an objective substrate upon which the

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tadviparyayeṇa viṣayinas taddharmānām ca viṣaye 'dhyāso mithyeti bhavitum yuktam. B.S.B. *op. cit.* and Hari Datta Sharma *op. cit.*, p. 3.

transimposition is possible (it is *pratyakṣavastu,* or *de res* object of perception. But what is so difficult to assume, the *Śūnyavāda* adversary asks, that delusions can be without substrates, such as a *keśoṇḍuka* (a bright spot inside the finger-stimulated eyelids). Why not just say this: *śūnyasya śuktyātmanā, vivartamānasya rajatarūpeṇa vivartatā*[1] nothingness first appears as nacre; then nacre is perceived as silver; the silver is the result of a mistaken transimposition (of the properties of silverness, splendour, etc) which is *asat* (in both theories) on to nacre, which itself is *śūnya* or empty, i.e. the substrate, if one has to have one, is nothingness (emptiness) itself. Tempted to agree with this reply, for it is consistent with the theory of *māyā*, Śaṅkara is afraid that this might entail sacrificing the substrate which he needs ultimately to ground his absolute principle. He could not countenance that defeat in argument, and so he suggests that it is less prolix to assume that the process is inexplicable or indeterminate (*anirvacanīyatā*).[2] If Śaṅkara holds on to this view then this is a case of disanalogy and he should not have invoked it in the first place, no more than the design-argument in Western theodicy should have used the clock-maker's analogy which Hume skilfully ravaged.

Another criticism, most forcefully articulated by the seventh century Mādhyamika philosopher, Candrakīrti, but which fails to receive a decisive response in Śaṅkara, is that the transcendental (T-) self which the Upaniṣads and Hindu philosophers speak of is in the end an intellectually conceived notion of self. Either this T-self is the same as or it is different from the psycho-physical complex that knows it. If it is the same, then it is not transcendental; if it is different, then its knowledge is not possible. Both possibilities lead to a logical *cul-de-sac*.[3] If, again, the self is said to be the mere constellation of parts of the psycho-physical complex, then, as King Milinda was reminded, it would be as odd as looking for the referent to the naming term 'cart' in the parts that make up the vehicle, individually or wholly. One is tempted to say that it is both same and different, but this would not satisfy

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1 Cited in Hari Datta Sharma, *op cit.*, p. 14.

2 The term *anirvacanīya* is not Śaṅkara's, it is curled out of the texts on the definitional debate over *adhyāsa* in the *Bhāmatī* commentary on *adhyāsa*, under the *sarvathapi* text, in Parimala Sanskrit Series No 1. *The Brahmasūtra Śaṅkara Bhāṣya with commentaries Bhāmatī Kalpataru and Parimala* , ed. and introduction by Ester Solomon, Ahmedabad, 1981. p. 32-34.

3 See the fine study on Candrakīrti by Peter Fenner, *The Ontology of the Middle Way*, Dordrecht, 1990.

Śaṅkara's stipulation of the purity of the self without being mixed up with the non-self of the psycho-physical complex. If we condescend to say that T-self is neither the same nor different from the psycho-physical complex, then also Śaṅkara would not have any difficulty, because this dialectic has the subtle force of persuading one not to take any decisive position or stance on the essential nature of the self, and there would be no escape from the ubiquitous spiral of *duḥkha, saṃsāra,* re-death. For did not the Upaniṣadic seers whisper that the transcendental is blessedly blissful, truthfully real, and basking in its own consciousness?

V. The crypto-Cartesian certitude

We move on to another important question: What however is the privileged content of 'I'? How is this known? To the question how do we know the self if our only mode of self-awareness is through the falsely identified non-self (this body, this name, as being mine), Śaṅkara replies, 'it is apprehended as the true content shimmering beneath the 'I', and because the self, opposed to the non-self, is well-known in the world as the immediately perceived reality'. A little later, he gives the classical argument, with regard to the indubitability, self-certainty, of the reality of 'I', viz., that 'everyone is conscious of the existence of (his) self, and never thinks, "'I am not". If the existence of the self were not known, everyone would think "I am not", (which is self-contradictory). This, then, is the substrate of "I-ness", the ground of being"'.[1] Couple with this his earlier observation that the supposition that if the referent were the substrate of the body, there would be no continuity between the 'I' in the young days, the 'I' in current days, and the 'I' in old age. The corollary is that, given the disparate cognitions from one moment to the next, since the substrate undergoes constant change, there cannot be any sense of a unified personal identity. So even a substrate is denied. These are serious claims about the life of self which call for close scrutiny.

Śaṅkara is right in pointing out that personal identity cannot be understood in the same way as the identity of a thing, i.e. of material substance, and that the attempt to deny one's self leads to absurd consequences. As we know the same move of self-denial led Descartes to conclude that the 'mind', *res cogitans,* a mental being, in its extendedness, exists, no more and no less; nothing, however, about the self as Śaṅkara wants to establish follows from

1 *Bhāmatī* ed. Solomon, pp. 35-36.

the Cartesian insight. There are serious logical flaws in Descartes' argument, as Chisholm and others have rightly pointed out[1] but Śaṅkara is nowhere near providing the missing premises and analysis that would clinch the argument in his favour. An essential self-consciousness need not be the sufficient 'pre-reflective' remainder of the *cogito* (or even of the Husserlian *cogitationes* as Sartre argued): it could as well be a walking, loving, willing, singing, suffering self as the subjective pole of a self-constituting consciousness but which is only ever so in constant encounter with the world, the objective. There is no third, transcendent self-consciousness between the knower-known dualism. Indeed, Hume famously (and countless Buddhists infamously before him) failed to discover anything like an abiding self short of a bundle of perceptions and sensory impressions: 'I never catch *myself* without a perception'.[2] He was not too bothered by the questions of continuity and unity or self-reflexivity, although this lacunae made Hume's critique incomplete, which philosophers have since addressed with great force, notably Charles Taylor and Derek Parfit in their different ways, the former preferring a more hermeneutical-naturalistic route while the latter the analytical route.[3]

Nonetheless, Śaṅkara is adamant that the sense of my individuated existence in the utterance 'I am' is a methodological criterion for indubitable knowledge and the possibility of transcendental experience, at a level which goes beyond the mere thought, or *cogito*, which is its starting point (verily the object of the concept 'I'). The denial of 'I exist' is said to be self-contradictory, in which case it has more than an existential status; the locus of a 'thought-form' (which Kant trades in for the empirical ego) is there as a category without which there can be no conception of a thinker, a doubter, in short, a being endowed with consciousness. Thus the 'I' is there of necessity. It is not just the *condition* of knowledge (as it is for Kant), it is knowable as pure undifferentiated consciousness. Its *knownness* is of a kind (*paravidyā*) not shareable with *knowing* in the phenomenal or empirical sense.

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1 See Amelie Rorty, ed., *The Identity of Person,* Berkeley, 1976; Sydney Shoemaker and Richard Swinburne, *Personal Identity*, Blackwell, 1984; Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge, 1973, pp. 1-18, 64-81.

2 David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature,* Oxford, 1978.

3 Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford, 1984; Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self in the making of the modern identity*, 1989.

Śaṅkara was a modernist well before his time; modernity begins when thought turns from the world to ask about the being to whom the world appears, and this being is variously posited as 'man', 'self', 'person' and so on. This is the transcendental turn and it achieves its glorious acme is Descartes's *cogito*, in the West; but Śaṅkara, as I think I have argued persuasively here, predated Descartes, not for the latter's wrongly celebrated dualism, at least in respect of thinking that it is possible to return to the origins of thought, of consciousness. One may call the origin the 'unthought', after Heidegger. Cognitive inquiry coupled with a transcendental method is the apparatus which makes the self completely transparent to itself. As such Śaṅkara's ideograph of the self commends itself to the best theories of subjectivities produced in the West, but with it comes a whole language and cultural baggage which Western (Western-trained) philosophers understandably find difficult to fathom.

Being charitable here, one is tempted to suggest that Śaṅkara was on a noble path of articulating the 'unthought' in the tradition; but he fell in the same trap as the Western modernist did later, viz. of thinking that this knowledge is to be a result of a monad privately or inwardly examining the certainty of the contents of intuition. This is a rather solitary individualist project which places enormous reliance on the experience of the individual. How are we to go about establishing the veracity if this experience? The resources and testimony of others cannot be ruled out. But how can this be allowed under the theory if *others* are not warranted an existential status, let alone an epistemological role? I would like to bring the following considerations to bear at this juncture.

Firstly, that there might be a social, or at best an inter-subjective, underside to the inquiry, or that history has a pre-eminent role to play in the production of any knowledge (and may dialectically prove to be an ontological fabric of the object and subject of the inquiry as latter-day modernists have come to believe) did not occur to Śaṅkara, partly because none of his adversaries raised this problem. A different kind of genealogy was at work then. There was only the challenge or spectre of no-self, the bastard child of Indian spirituality that he had to deal with. The kinds of limits on exegesis and all philosophical quests which promises definitive conclusions, or what amounts to the same thing, a closure, that Gadamer so poignantly has pressed in our times, did not trouble a Śaṅkara.

Equally significantly, thinking as we are in the late part of the twentieth century, can we continue simply to take Śaṅkara on his

own grounds, but ignore the post-modern intervention 'to dissolve all claims to subjective fixity in order to make way for a fundamental shift in perspective towards an unconscious subject, from the same to the different - the Other'.[1] This shift would entail that the subject henceforth would be displaced from an inner subjective certitude to the realm of the symbolic and, therefore, would be situated in a discourse that is always historically contingent. The subject as self loses its status as founding authority of pure rationality or of pristine spirituality. French critical thinkers in particular have driven home a perspectivism, in the manner of Nietzsche, that seeks to engage with the other, not to isolate the other, to 'welcome the Other' as Levinas would have expressed it, and interrogates its own conditions of possibility. The self is most itself when it is decentering, and recognises itself as being-in-the-world and very much of the world.

Secondly, the problem of continuity as Śaṅkara raises it, without any mention of the dimension of inner time-consciousness that I take him to be denying, is utterly misconceived, for there is nothing logically odd in supposing that consciousness possessed of memory, intentionality and imagination can retain a trace or semblance of a more or less unbroken personal life; the identity of a person throughout time is explicable in terms of the *beliefs* and *self-narratives, habits, style of existence*, coupled with hopes, expectations, appropriations and projections a being has about her own states at various temporal stretches; and the threads that hold, these together also need be no less contingent, accidental and poly-morphologically perverse as any of Freud's couch creations would reveal. Besides, as Strawson[2] has shown, the notion of the individual embeds much more than just the body, or the mind, for personal subjectivity is conceivably much wider in scope, with interactive aspects, past histories and future trajectories, than traditional thinking, mind/body dualism in particular, has supposed it to be. Also, agency involving rational choice, as Parfit has shown, requires no conception of a continuing re-identifiable substrate, much less a substance of any kind.[3]

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1 Drawing here on analysis by H. D. Harootunian, 'Foucault, Genealogy, History The Pursuit of Otherness', in *After Foucault: Humanistic Knowledge, Postmodern Challenges*, Jonathan Arac, ed., New Jersey, 1988, pp. 123, 130

2 Peter Strawson, *Individuals: an essay in descriptive metaphysics*, London, 1959.

3 Parfit *op. cit.* develops the thesis that one can act morally or rationally but impersonally, i.e., without regard for others, because it is difficult,

Kant earlier on had suggested that the ultimate logical subject is the person, and that the person might even be a composite being, a totality. This, again, resonates better with the Upaniṣadic conception of the self as a dimensionally multivalent being (which is exactly what I take Śaṅkara to be rejecting).

But what about the suggestion that the secret lies transcendentally in the realm of the concealed consciousness as the abiding witness and the giver of the 'I-cognition' ? This position also has problems, not least for the reasons Rāmānuja in his rebuttal has drawn out, which is instructive to consider here.

Rāmānuja makes the now well-accepted phenomenological observation that consciousness is inherently intentional in its internal structure, that is to say, consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, that there is no such thing or being as a pure undifferentiated consciousness. Indeed, *difference* is the essential trait of consciousness; and I imagine that this also entails the essential temporality - or being-in-time - of consciousness. Rāmānuja's contention is that consciousness is a presence which is a distinguishing attribute of the I.[1] Indeed, *difference* runs right through all awareness. All consciousness, Rāmānuja argues, implies difference. His argument turns on the intentionality of the eidetic structure, in which all presences are given as noetic correlates via noema or internal meaning states. It follows that consciousness of the self does not stand unaffected by the internal difference, i.e. there is no escaping the fact that consciousness of the self, however refined and reflexively turned back upon itself from the stream of awareness-states, is just another 'consciousness of..' presencing. The knower here as anywhere else is the *ahaṃkāra*, the agent or subjective pole in all knowing, which in its effort to distance itself from the plethora of 'I-am-aware..' cognitions sediments into *aham-pratyaya*, (literally 'I-concept'), and is rather close to the idea of 'transcendental ego' in Kant, or even in Husserl. But this is precisely the sense of 'I' which Śaṅkara wants to deny either as the true knower of the self (for this latter 'I' lodged in *ahaṃkāra* [=inner common sense] is contingent, changeable, and ultimately destroyed by senility or

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in real and imagined cases, to establish and know just who or what a person is (oneself included), how to distinguish between different persons, different lives, and so on.

1 *Śrībhāṣya Rāmānuja's Commentary on Vedānta Sūtra,* Sacred Books of the East Series, Max Müller, general ed. trans. Thibaut, Delhi, 1967, p. 61, 41, 63.

eventually by death); because the transcendental ego is not transcendent enough! But to Rāmānuja's thinking there cannot be any other subject which escapes this difference, and it need not be expected to. Rāmānuja has no difficulty accepting the logical identification of subject and object in the horizon of a consciousness marked by *difference*. Again, he has a slight problem giving precise sense to the idea that the 'I-concept' that comes about as a result of the bracketed reflections of consciousness on the *ahaṃkāra*. He asks a pertinent question in this regard, to wit: Does consciousness become a reflection of the *ahaṃkāra*, or does the *ahaṃkāra* become a reflection of consciousness? This is like asking: does the mirror reflect your image or do you project your image on the mirror? What is the logical relation between the 'I' and consciousness and should this not be considered to involve the same opposition or contradictoriness (that is, of transimposition)? I am not so sure that Rāmānuja's own solution of identity-in-difference gets us out of the viciousness that he rightly charges Śaṅkara with (for identity-in-difference is as incoherent an idea as total self-identity), but he has at least made us aware that non-difference in matters of consciousness (for example, in 'I am consciousness') would amount to as crude a form of tautology as it would be to say that 'Rāmu holds a stick' is about the stick only, or about Ramu only.

VI. Conclusion

The self that starts early in the tradition as an innocuous and nebulous mantric effect - or rather as a remnant of the primeval sacrifice of the gods, in a background where existence, human existence included, appears to be problematic, but gradually emerges into a powerful symbol for the unity of all being, consciousness and the ultimate. But in the Upaniṣads this conception of self is deepened in other ways: embodied existence and a notion of personhood is never discarded for the utterly abstract. *Ātman* as a unifying principle of personal life, encompassing traits of intelligence, affection, agency, self-awareness, for instance in *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad* is located in a space within the heart. In this space is a subtle ball of fire, which consumes food and warms the body. This fire in the *Śvetāśvatara* is given the size of a hundredth part of the end of the hair which itself is rather subtle and is the basis of the contingent consciousness we live with in our everyday life. But contingency is

the key descriptive term here: that is the reality and impulse the Upaniṣads never run away from. Anyway, it is this minute space of the heart and the fire within it that gives one the identity of the *person.*[1] This indwelling principle is identified with the concept of 'I', and 'you' no less. It is this which is also the root of the transcendental ego and the empirical ego. In a very real sense this self as represented and its various modalities is a constituted or constructed self. But this constituted and constituting person-nature has an enduring capacity for life, which gives the bearer the sense of continuing identity and reflective self-consciousness, i.e. a sense of personal self, and it comes rather close to meeting the essential conditions of a person which Nicholas Rescher has forcefully put forward, viz. intelligence, affectivity, agency, rationality, self-understanding, self-esteem, mutual recognisance,[2] some would doubtless wish to add, 'suffering' and 'intuition'.

But the beginnings of a theory of *person* as descriptive of the self is extinguished by Śaṅkara, which indeed is a great pity, for in the temptation to weave in pure abstraction an image of a self that might be absolute, *logo-centric,* Śaṅkara lost sight of the contingency of personal life along with its social and therefore religious fabric. Hegel was right about the incoherence of the Indian notion that elevates a finite thing of this world above all else, and then empties the world, thus reducing the concept itself to an impoverished negativity or notional emptiness. Hegel complains that *Brahman,* to which Ātman or self is analytically equivalent (from Śaṅkara onwards), is a purely abstract, impersonal principle without self-consciousness (because it has no Other), and whose being is potential not actual; and that because of this the world of particulars can have no part in it, rather they are entirely outside it, alien and independent of it, never in any true sense being created or sustained by *Brahman.* But both Hegel and Śaṅkara discard the painful Other by dissolving difference through their logic or principle of absolute identity, and making self-consciousness 'only [the] motionless tautology [of], Ego is Ego, I am I'.[3]

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1 See my *The Self and its destiny in Hinduism, op. cit.*, p. 17.

2 Nicholas Rescher, 'What is a person?', *Human Interests,* Stanford, 1990, pp. 6-7.

3 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind,* trans. J. B. Baillie, New York & London, 1967, p. 219. Cf. *Critique of Pure Reason.* B. xxvii, trans. Kemp-Smith, 1929, p. 27 as discussed and cited in Patrick Hutchings, 'The Old and The New Sublime: do they signify God?', *Sophia,* 100th issue; vol. 34, no 1, 1995, p. 53.

Finally, rather than declaring the death of the self of Vedānta, let me advert to one more possible motivation in Śaṅkara's project of ridding the experience of the ego of all the expressive categories of language and psychological atomism. By a series of reflective procedures of negative thinking (*neti neti*), as Zilberman had aptly pointed out, Śaṅkara wants to convince his audience that the paradoxes of description pertain wholly to the nature of linguistic structures themselves; the freedom that he wants is of another kind.[1] But he utilises this philosophical foundationalism to ground a particular semantic of Indian culture which by now was gaining hold - viz. of the *sannyāsin* tradition, the ideal of the perfect renunciate life, which he prays would become the absolute denominator of the Hindu civilisation, as it was of the *śramaṇic* tradition, which *Brāhmaṇism* was bent on appropriating. This motivation *per force* has to strike at the linguistic process and bracket out, in particular, the significative, denotative, symbolic and intentional functions of language, on which thinking relies so completely to make corresponding bridges or amends with the objective world, as Matilal has alerted us to.[2] Deconstruct language and show, as later Wittgenstein did, that all discourse of the world proceeds through a collective conspiracy of 'language-games'; this will be sufficient to open up the possibility of a direct experience of the perfect ideal of *sannyāsa* (the *aparokṣānubhūti* is not of any *vastutā* or objective state of affairs but of a supposedly self-transcendent subjective state of euphorically inward withdrawal). *Ātman* becomes but its meta-descriptive symbol, and a semiotic pointer to *Brahman*, the absolute meta-linguistic counterpart, indeed the abstracted Absolute. This linguistic design succeeds, as it was intended to, in having an enormous influence on the culture and organisation of the Indian society.

1 See excellent analysis in David B. Zilberman, *The Birth of Meaning in Hindu Thought*, ed. Robert S. Cohen, Dordrecht, 1988, pp. 222 ff.

2 See Bimal Krishna Matilal, *Word and the World: India's Contribution to the Study of Language,* Delhi, 1991.