

The Ontology of Self in Three Systems of Indian Philosophy: A Comparative and Veridical Analysis

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The over three-thousand year old realm of traditional Indian philosophy has, historically, included a very wide array of schools, concerns and philosophical positions. Many of the very same concerns that were to be discussed much later in the Western philosophical tradition found their first systematic expressions in India centuries, and in some cases millennia, before their Western articulation. These include many of the issues to be found in the fields of epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, phenomenology, politics, ontology and psychology. Of the many topics discussed in Indian philosophy has been the debate over the exact nature of the human self. Different schools have held very dissimilar views on this question, ranging from the notion that there is no real self (Buddhism and Charvaka), to the idea that the self is nothing less than the omnipotent, unlimited Absolute (Advaita), with many other positions lying in between these two extremes.

While there have been a wide variety of opinions about the nature of the self, however, there have historically been three dominant views on this topic in India. These three are:

- 1) the *anatta*, or “no-self”, view of Buddhism,
- 2) the non-dualist view of Advaita, which I will characterize as the *Tat tvam asi*, or “you are that (Absolute)”, view;
- 3) and the Vishishta-advaita (Qualified non-dualism) view of Ramanuja.

In the following work, I will accomplish several tasks. These include a brief description of each of the Buddhist, Advaitin and Vishishta-advaitin perspectives on the true nature of the self, a comparative analysis of these three different views, and finally a veridical analysis to determine which of these theories holds the most validity and truth from a philosophical perspective.

Previous to the arising of Buddhist thought in the sixth century B.C.E., the prevalent view in India on the nature of the self was that found in the philosophical treatises known as the Upanishads (2510-600 B.C.E.). The portrait of the self presented by these many texts, however, seem upon first inspection to reveal apparently contradictory accounts of the nature of the self. On the one hand, we find passages that seem to state that the self is non-different from the Absolute. Several such verses include the *maha-vakyas*, or great sayings, such as, “*tat tvam asi*” (“you are that”), “*aham brahmasmi*” (“I am Brahman”), etc. On the other hand, we find verses in these works that clearly make a quantitative distinction between God and the individual self. One such passage is found in the Shvetashvatara Upanishad (6: 16):

"The all-powerful one, the omniscient one, the selfborn, as the (supreme) spirit, the creator of time, possessing *gunas* [qualities], the all-knowing one, the Lord of the primaeval matter (*pradhanam*), of the individual selfs and of *gunas*, He brings about a standstill condition (*sthiti*), a transmigration (of the self), deliverance and bondage."

Such seemingly opposing verses have led to a great deal of disagreement as to the actual position of the Upanishads on the question of whether the self is identical with the Absolute or distinct.

Despite these differences, however, many traditional Indian philosophers, as well as a number of contemporary scholars, conclude that the Upanishads most likely taught a variant of Bheda-abheda, or simultaneous difference and non-difference, philosophy.¹ In any case, all philosophers and scholars have agreed that at a bare minimum, the Upanishads certainly uphold the eternal continuity, imperishability and coherent nature of the self.

This was not to be the case with the later school of Buddhism. Gautama Buddha (ca.563 B.C.E. - ca. 483 B.C.E.), in an attempt to construct a metaphysics that would side-step the Vedic revelation altogether, had taught a doctrine known as *anatta*, or no-self. According to Buddhism, the empirical reality which we experience about us consists of a never-ending, ever-fluctuating field of activity. Everything that exists is in perpetual motion and is constantly changing. Whether we are speaking of everyday material objects, thoughts, concepts, or even our own bodies, everything around us exists in a perpetual cycle of motion which involves coming into being, persisting momentarily and finally disintegrating into non-being. This world-view can be summed up by the dual Buddhist doctrines of *anityata*, or the universal impermanence of all things, and *kshanikavada*, or the momentariness of all reality. There is, according to Buddhism, no continuity or permanence in anything that we experience, think or are. Therefore, neither is there any continuity of the self.

The human person consists of nothing more than the continuity of an entity which is in itself ever-changing. The so-called *jiva*, according to the Buddhist account, is no more than a conglomeration of five separate elements, *skandhas*, brought together in the human person as a result of the individual's own *karma*, and giving the appearance, at least, of a singular continuous living entity. The five elements of which every human being is constituted are:

- 1) body,
- 2) feelings,
- 3) perception,
- 4) predispositions,
- 5) consciousness.

When these five otherwise disparate elements come together, we then have the illusion of there being a permanent self, an "I". Beyond these, however, there is no self, no continuously existing individual living being, no self. Kenneth Ch'en summarizes the Buddhist position in the following manner.

"At any moment, according to him [Gautama Buddha], we are but a temporary composition of the five aggregates, and as these change every moment, so does the composition. Therefore, all that we are is but a continuous living entity which does not remain the same for any two consecutive moments, but which come into being and disappears as soon as it arises." (Ch'en, 44)

Thus, there is no self, according to Buddhism. Rather, our experience of selfhood is no more than a series of momentary semi-organic complexes of psycho-physical elements continuously succeeding one another. This continuous, ever-born, ever-changing, ever-ceasing entity is kept in intact motion by the *karma* that it accumulated in previous momentary existences, with the hope of someday bringing about the cessation of continuous rounds of birth and death by achieving *nirvana*, or the final dissolution of its ever-continuous ever-momentary existence. Liberation consists of the realization that there is no one in need of liberation.

Among the first of many Indian philosophers to point out the inconsistencies of the Buddhist position on the nature of self was Shankara (ca.200-168 B.C.E. or 800-832 C.E.), of the Advaita school. One flaw in the Buddhist scheme which Shankara points out revolves around the concept of *karma*. According to the law of *karma*, for every action which a free-volitional, rational human being performs, there is necessarily an equal reaction. For each morally good act that we perform, we will eventually have to experience a good reaction; and similarly for morally bad actions. It is the inescapable need to experience our future *karma* which necessitates our continuous presence in material bodies. This is a doctrine which is accepted and upheld by both Hindu and Buddhist thinkers.

The problem that Shankara points out with the Buddhist position is that, if there is indeed no enduring being - if the being who experiences the reaction of *karma* is, in principle, a different being from the one who caused the initial action, thus creating the *karma* - then is it not the case that an innocent being is suffering for the crimes of another? To hold that a person is nothing more than a successive chain of disparate and temporary entities, randomly brought together and then rent asunder, only to be replaced by a new complex set of elements, all in the blink of any eye, means that a being is not the same volitional entity it was at point **b** now that it finds itself in point **c**. Consequently, to state that being **c** should have to suffer the punishment for crimes performed by being **b**, even though they are in actuality two separate beings, is the equivalent of saying that I should suffer a punishment for a crime performed by my ancestor. While such a notion of inter-generational punishment might be prevalent in religious cultures which teach the doctrine of original sin (Christianity, Judaism and Islam), such a view is not in concert with the Indian view of ethics. If there is no being who is performing an action, there can certainly be no being to experience the results of that action. Anything short of such a rigid causal requirement would be unjust.

A similar argument is made by Shankara against the Buddhist interpretation of liberation, or *nirvana*. Again, according to the Buddhist account, the living entity is experiencing a continuous cycle of pain and suffering. In order to attain relief from the perpetual misery of *samsara*, a human being must cease all craving and desire, realize the transitory and interdependent nature of all reality and achieve final liberation from suffering by attaining *nirvana*. As Shankara and other thinkers have pointed out, however, if there is no one, continuous, unitary entity who is craving, performing actions, and then experiencing the resultant suffering, then what is the meaning and purpose of the liberation of such a non-existent entity? To state that a non-existent being is in need of liberation is equivalent to saying that a fictional character in a novel or the image of a person in a painting needs to be liberated from their respective aesthetic confines. If there is no being who is there to experience the final bliss of *nirvana*, then what is the ultimate value of *nirvana*? Who is being liberated?

In addition to these critical observations about the Buddhist no-self theory, Shankara offers two positive arguments against this doctrine, one positing the existence of the self, the other demonstrating the continuity of the self. In the first argument, Shankara gives an argument that is very reminiscent of DesCartes' *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) realization. The self is an experientially and logically undeniable fact, states Shankara. And if one attempts to deny the existence of the self, then in that very denial, he is asserting the existence of a self who is doing the denying. For only a conscious, thinking being can make such a self-referential statement. In his second argument, Shankara denies the momentariness and non-continuity of the self by an

appeal to the faculty of memory. In memory, there is the presupposition of the continual identity and persistence of the individual doing the remembering. There is only one individual who experiences the events, persons, objects and thoughts of a particular life. We do not remember the memories of some other living being, but our own experiences. Thus there is a continuity of the experiencer. There is only one continuous experiencer, not many extending back in a randomly assembled causal chain. Through these and similar arguments, Shankara and other Hindu philosophers succeeded in weakening the Buddhist theory of there being no continuity of being, and reestablishing the ontological integrity of the self.

Having examined his reactions towards the Buddhist *anatta* theory, we will now look at Shankara's own philosophical views on the nature of the self. Shankara held that the very essence of the self is *chaitanya*, or pure and unadulterated consciousness. Additionally, the self is unconditioned by such factors as space and time, being itself *vibhu*, or all-pervasive. "It is neither atomic nor intermediary in size.", according to Sinha,

"If the self were atomic, it could not pervade all the parts of the body, and the quality of consciousness could not be perceived in the whole body" (Sinha, 70).

The self, for Shankara, is one unitary entity. There is not a plurality of selves, but only one eternal, omniscient Self, which simultaneously exists in all beings. Being undivided, and thus unchanging, it is devoid of qualities, agency and the ability to enjoy or suffer, all of which would entail a multiplicitous being.

For Shankara, the self (*atman*) and the Absolute (Brahman) are one unitary entity. The temporary instance of an individual self viewed as being separate from Brahman is no more than a mistaken perception on the part of the human being born from the power of *avidya*, or ignorance. The individual self is in actuality no more than an illusory limitation imposed upon Brahman by the internal organ of *manas*, or mind. This process of the mistaken limitation of Brahman has been compared by Shankara to the illusion of the limiting of space in a jar or in a house. He has also described this limitation as being no more than a perverted reflection of Brahman in *avidya*, somewhat akin to the reflecting of the Sun or the moon in the water of a pond. Thus, Shankara's ultimate conclusion regarding the nature of the individual self is that there is no such entity in reality. When illusion is stripped away, all that is left is Brahman. We are that Brahman. We are God.

Shankara's attempt to equate the finite *atman*, or individual self, with the infinite Absolute was not an original project on his part. Indeed, Gaudapada and several others formulated similar non-dual theories before him. Similarly, throughout the history of Indian philosophy, we have found many defenders of the teaching that upheld the qualitative dependence and quantitative distinction of the *atman vis a vis* God. Known very generally as the Vaishnava, or Bhagavata, school of Vedanta, these theocentric philosophers have included such individuals as Bodhayana, Tanka, Dramida, Nimbarka, Madhva and Vallabha. By far, however, the most significant of these theistic thinkers was Sri Ramanuja Acharya (1017 C.E.-1137 C.E.). It was Ramanuja who was the first Vaishnava Vedantist to respond directly and forcefully to Shankara's notions about the nature of the self.

The pronounced differences between the Advaitic ideas of Shankara and the Vishishta-advaita position of Ramanuja begin at the very question of what is the essence of the self. Whereas for

Shankara, the self is of the nature of pure consciousness, Ramanuja posits consciousness as both the inherent nature, as well as one of the distinguishing attributes, of the self. The example that Ramanuja gives to explain the distinction between consciousness as substance and consciousness as attribute is that of the flame of a lamp. The flame is the substantial entity. It is light in and of itself. In addition to being light, however, the flame has a distinct property and attribute, also known as light, which emanates from the center of the flame to then influence things external to the flame itself. In the same manner in which we view the relationship between light and its luminosity, or the relationship between the center of a circle and its circumference, similarly the self and consciousness, while being logically distinguishable to the mind, are not separable in any essential sense. The *atman* is a self-illuminated entity. It reveals its own nature without the assistance of any principle external to itself. It is consciousness itself. But its consciousness is both substantive, as well as adjectival, or attributive, and not merely substantive, as Shankara asserts. Like Shankara, Ramanuja holds that consciousness is definitive of the self. But more, it is also an attribute that reveals things external to the self.

For Ramanuja, the self is ultimately the 'I', the experiencer, who persists even after all attempts at sublating illusion from the true self has ceased to produce results. "Such consciousness of the 'I' as is not sublated by anything else has the self for its object", says Ramanuja in his Shri-bhashya, "while, on the other hand, such consciousness of the 'I' as has the body for its object is mere Nescience" (72). The true self cannot be the body composed of matter. If it were, then how do we explain the fact that even though the body is constantly undergoing irreversible changes on both a visual and molecular level, the person identifying with the body does not change? The self cannot be the mind. For we are constantly changing our minds, sometimes expanding them, sometimes even losing them. The self is not the intellect, since our sense of selfhood is not dependent upon our intellectual capabilities. An uneducated person has just as robust a sense of self-hood as does the most well-read academician. According to Ramanuja, we are ultimately the experiencer, the person who is consistently aware of all these external changes as they are taking place. This sense of 'I' is not merely attributive of the self, but is the very essence of the self. It is the self. It is what persists during the infinite number of transformations that take place in the material body of the self, after the death of the body, and upon the cessation of *avidya* and the subsequent attaining of liberation.²

Moreover, this 'I' that is the true self is a knowing being. Ramanuja holds that there are two distinct objects of knowledge for the self. One is substantive knowledge, *svarupa-bhuta-jnana*. The other is attributive knowledge, or *dharma-bhuta-jnana*. It is through the former that the self apprehends itself. *Svarupa-bhuta-jnana* is self-knowledge. Self-consciousness is the necessary foundation and the substratum of whatever knowledge the self has of any and all things external to itself. Attributive knowledge (*dharma-bhuta-jnana*), on the other hand, is precisely this apprehending ability on the part of the self of all things that are non-self, whether a) matter, b) other finite selves or c) the supreme Self (*Param-atman*) of reality, known as Brahman, or God³. Neither of these two forms of knowledge, however, are ever equated by Ramanuja with the essence of the self, unlike the case with Shankara. Rather, Ramanuja holds that the self is the knowing subject (*gunin*); while knowledge itself is always a *guna*, or a qualitative function of the self.⁴

Another point of departure for these two great Vedantins is on the question of the finitude of the self. According to Shankara, the self is all-pervasive and omnipresent, being non-distinct from Brahman. The self is infinite in the scope of its knowledge, presence and power. Ramanuja,

holding the position that the self is monadic in nature, and therefore finite and limited, strongly disagrees with this notion, and offers the following arguments to support his position.

If it were, indeed, the case that the self were all-pervasive, then the self would be aware of all experiences, all the pains and pleasures, of all beings at all times. If the self were not limited in nature, then how is it that the individual self is only aware of its own individual experiences, and not that of all beings? I am not even aware of the experiences of my own friends unless they share those experiences with me; and even then, I would know of these experiences only by my friends' verbal testimonies, not because these experiences are my own. What, then, to speak of my inability to know the experiences of all beings, known and unknown to me? This ability being absent from individual selves, Ramanuja consequently that the self is atomic and monadic in nature.

Shankara would counter this claim by asking how it is possible for a minute atomic being to control an instrument as large as the human body? In answer to this query, Ramanuja says that, though the self is atomic in nature, consciousness, as an attribute of the self, pervades the totality of the body irregardless of how large or small the body might be. Ramanuja offers the following example in support of his contention:

"As a drop of sandal-ointment, although applied to one spot of the body only, produces a refreshing sensation extending over the whole body, thus, the self also, although dwelling in one part of the body only, is conscious of sensation taking place in any part of the body."

(Shri-bhashya 2.3.24)

The self, then, though finite and limited in its inherent nature, does have the ability to extend its influence beyond the confines of its own intrinsic nature by means of its *chaitanya*, or consciousness attribute.

The question of attributes and qualities within the realm of spirit itself brings up another point of contention between Shankara and Ramanuja. For the former holds that consciousness, whether we are speaking of either *atman* or Brahman, is necessarily devoid of attributes (*nirguna*), being in a position of ontological transcendence in relation to matter. There also seem to be several passages in the Upanishads that support the idea that spirit does not have attributes. Ramanuja, however, points out that when the scriptures declare that consciousness is without qualities, the qualities that these passages are referring to are the temporal qualities that arise as a result of *prakriti*, or matter. The existence of qualities in and of themselves are not what is being denied.

As is becoming apparent, the ultimate truth that Ramanuja wishes to establish is two-fold: 1) that there is a clear distinction between the limited, finite self on the one hand, and the unlimited, infinite Absolute on the other. 2) The relationship between these two is one of dependence and lordship, respectively. In Ramanuja's account of reality, there are three distinct Reals: Brahman (the Absolute), *atman* (the plurality of living beings) and *jagat* (the world we experience around us). Of these, *jagat* is insentient, and Brahman and *atman* are sentient. Of the sentient beings, *atman* has an attributive relationship with Brahman. Both *atman* and *jagat* are considered by Ramanuja to be parts of Brahman in the limited sense that they are qualities, or modes, of the latter. He describes the relationship between these three Reals in the following way in his Shri-bhashya:

"The individual self is a part of the highest Self; as the light issuing from a luminous thing such as fire or the sun is a part of that body; or as the generic characteristics of a cow or horse, and the white or black colour of things so coloured, are attributes and hence parts of the things in which those attributes inhere; or as the body is a part of an embodied being." (563)

Both *jagat* and *atman* form the metaphorical "body" of Brahman. In the same manner in which the self has a body, which it is superior to, and controls and uses for its own higher purposes, God too has a "body" which exists for the sake of the possessor of the body, the Self, or God, Whom Ramanuja considers to be the Overself, or Self, of all existence. All that is not God exists in a relationship of utter dependence on God.

One analogy that can be given in order to further understand the relationship of these three ontological Reals in Ramanuja's scheme is the example of the tree and its roots. Brahman can be compared to the roots of a mighty, blooming tree. *Jagat* and *atman* can be seen as being comparable to the leaves of the tree. The leaves exist as fully dependent attributes of the tree itself. If the leaves attempt to have an independent existence separate from the tree, let us say by attempting to gain nourishment by somehow by-passing the roots of the tree, the fate in store for the leaves is certain diminishment of their own sustenance and survival. But if the leaves, instead, acknowledge their intrinsic dependence upon the root of the tree for their own survival, then the leaves will flourish. In a similar manner, not only is the self, according to Ramanuja, an entity distinct from Brahman due to its inherently finite nature, but the self is thoroughly controlled and supported by Brahman for its existence. This is in marked contrast to the view of Shankara, which states that the individual self is non-distinct from Brahman in every way.

It might be argued by some that at the very least, Shankara's views on the nature of the self served as a bridge between the Buddhistic account of there not being a self on the one hand, and the actual Vedic account of the self's ontological dependence upon God, on the other. Such an argument is negated, however, by the fact that, on closer inspection, there is actually very little distinction between the *anatta* and Advaita perspectives. For the former says that we have no self, and consequently no surviving individual existence after we achieve *nirvana*. Whereas Advaita claims that we have no individual existence or personality at all, are merely mayic instances of an amorphous Brahman, and lose any sense of self upon achieving liberation. In either account, the underlying assumption is that there is no actual self. Thus, rather than providing us with an account of the self that preserves the eternality of the self, Shankara gives us the prospect of realizing that we are in actuality eternally a non-self. It is only in the pre-Shankara Vedantic teachings of Bodhayana, as well as in the post-Shankara works of Ramanuja, that we have the full retrieval of the self's ontological integrity.

As we have seen, there have been several diverse theories pertaining to the nature of the self posited by the philosophers of India. These have included Gautama Buddha's *anatta* theory, Shankara's *advaita* doctrine and the *vishishta-advaita* teachings of the Vaishnava school. Though seeming on face value to be an improvement over the self-negating doctrine of *anatta*, *advaita* presents us with no more than a crypto-Buddhistic outcome when compared to the formulation presented by Ramanuja.

Notes

1. Some of the traditional Indian philosophers to have held this view include Yadava Prakasha and Jiva Gosvamin.

The most authoritative twentieth century scholar on this topic is P.N. Srinivasachari. See the latter's "The Philosophy of Bhedabheda" for further details.

2. While it is true that Shankara appears to make a similar "Cartesian"-like argument, it is important to note that Shankara's use of the sense of 'I' is employed by him merely in order to demonstrate the self's existence. Ramanuja's use of the term, on the other hand, is designed to make a very clear ontological and psychological statement.

3. These three components of reality, a) jagat, or matter, b) atman, or finite selves, c) Brahman, or the Absolute, constitute the three Reals of Vedantic ontology.

4. Ramanuja makes the following distinction: *chaitanya* is knowledge, while *chetana* is the knowing subject, the one endowed with knowledge. While knower and knowledge are in actuality inseparable, like a flame and its effulgence, they are at the same time logically distinguishable.

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