

# SHANKARA

(788-820 [!])

## COMMENTARY ON THE VEDANTA SUTRAS (*Brahmasutra-Bhashya*)<sup>1</sup>

### Self and Not-Self

It is obvious that the subject and the object — that is, the Self (*Atman*) and the Not-Self, which are as different as darkness and light are — cannot be identified with each other. It is a mistake to superimpose upon the subject or Self (that is, the "I," whose nature is consciousness) the characteristics of the object or Not-"I" (which is non-intelligent), and to superimpose the subject and its attributes on the object. Nonetheless, man has a natural tendency, rooted in ignorance (*avidya*), not to distinguish clearly between subject and object, although they are in fact absolutely distinct, but rather to superimpose upon each the characteristic nature and attributes of the other. This leads to a confusion of the Real (the Self) and the Unreal (the Not-Self) and causes us to say such [silly] things as "I am that," "That is mine," and so on . . . .<sup>2</sup>

How do the nature and attributes of objects (or objectivity) come to be superimposed upon the Self, which is not an object [but rather a pure subject]? Some say that we can superimpose the nature and attributes of an object only on such other objects as appear to us in sense perception and that the Self, which is entirely distinct from the Not-Self, is never an object [of sense perception]. Our reply to these views is as follows: First, the Self is not a non-object in the absolute sense. For one thing, it is the object denoted by the term "I," and, for another thing, we know that the Self exists [really and objectively] because of its immediate presence [within the sphere of direct intuitive experience]. Second, it is not true that the nature and attributes of objectivity can be superimposed only on such objects as appear before us in contact with our sense organs; for, after all, uninformed people commonly believe that the ether (which is not an object of sense perception) has a dark blue color . . . .<sup>3</sup>

The learned consider the kinds of superimposition described above to be grounded in ignorance (*avidya*), and the grasping of the true nature of the Self (as distinguished from that which is falsely superimposed upon it), they call knowledge (*vidya*). Those who acquire such knowledge recognize that neither the Self nor the Not-Self is in any way affected by any blemish or good quality produced by their mutual superimposition . . . .

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<sup>1</sup>Rendition and editing by George Cronk. © 1998. The *Vedanta Sutras* (also known as the *Brahma Sutra*), a collection of 555 aphorisms aimed at summarizing the philosophical teachings of the *Upanishads*, were written by Badarayana in the 1st century BC. These aphorisms are very brief and cryptic and cannot be understood without a commentary. Many such commentaries by philosophers in the Vedanta tradition have been written. Shankara's commentary, the *Brahmasutra-Bhashya*, was composed in Sanskrit. It is a large work of more than 800 pages in English translation. See the *Vedanta Sutras with the Commentary by Sankaracarya* [*acarya* (*acharya*) means "great teacher"], trans. George Thibaut, in *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. F. Max Muller, Vols. 34 (Part I) and 38 (Part II) (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988). (Shankara's name is also spelled in English as Sankara, Sancara, and Shamkara.)

<sup>2</sup>Vedanta philosophy teaches that the Self is real while the Not-Self is unreal and that to say such things as "I am a student," "This is my body," etc., is to falsely identify the Not-Self with the Self, the unreal with the real.

<sup>3</sup>In Vedanta cosmology, the "ether" is the most fundamental physical element. It arises out of *Brahman* and then gives rise to earth, water, fire, and air, the four basic components of the material world. The ether continues to exist in all material things and fills all space beyond the earth's atmosphere. From earth, the ether is perceived as "the sky" and is commonly (but incorrectly) taken to be blue in color.

[Nonetheless, many everyday beliefs and practices are based on the kind of ignorance we have been discussing.] Take, for example, the Hindu religion as commonly understood. The wise know that the true Self is free from all wants, that it is raised above the distinctions of the caste-system (Brahmin, Kshatriya, etc.), that it transcends transmigratory existence [the process of reincarnation]. But such wisdom and knowledge are useless and even contradictory to those who believe that sacrifices to the gods and other religious rituals produce rewards and well-being. Such beliefs and practices are rooted in ignorance of the true nature of the Self. Such religious teachings as "A Brahmin is to perform sacrifices" are operative only on the assumption that particular conditions such as caste, stage of life, age, outward circumstances, and so on, can be superimposed upon the Self . . . .

Other examples: When a man considers himself to be sound and fulfilled (or not) so long as his wife and children are sound and fulfilled (or not), he is superimposing Non-Self attributes upon the Self. When a man thinks of himself (that is, *his Self*) as stout, lean, fair, or as standing, walking, or jumping, he is then superimposing attributes of the body upon the Self. If he thinks "I am mute, or deaf, or one-eyed, or blind," he is then identifying the Self with attributes of the sense organs. And if he considers himself (that is, *his Self*) to be subject to desire, intention, doubt, determination, and so on, he is attributing the psychological activities and characteristics of the ego (*jiva*) to the Self (*Atman*), whereas the Self is the [transcendent] witness of all the transformations of the psyche and the ego . . . .

The study of the *Vedanta Sūtras* [composed by Badarayana in the 1st century BC] can free us from false conceptions of the Self (which constitute the cause of all evil) and can bring us to the knowledge of the true nature and absolute unity of the Self . . . .

## The Desire to Know *Brahman*<sup>1</sup>

### Knowing *Brahman*

. . . In order to know *Brahman*, we must meet the following conditions: (1) We must recognize the distinction between what is eternal and what is non-eternal; (2) we must renounce all desire to enjoy the fruits of our actions, both here and hereafter; and (3) we must acquire tranquility, self-restraint, freedom from religious ceremonies, patience in suffering, attention and concentration of the mind, faith, and the desire for final release (*moksha*). If these conditions are met, we may engage in the inquiry into *Brahman* and come to know it, but not otherwise . . . .

The complete comprehension of *Brahman* is the highest good since it destroys ignorance, the root of all evil and the seed of Samsara [the beginningless and unending cosmic cycle of becoming, being, and dissolving]. But before we begin an inquiry into the nature of *Brahman*, we should ask, is *Brahman* already known or not known? If it is already known, then it seems that there is no need for inquiry about it; and if it is not already known, then how can we enter into such an inquiry at all? We reply that *Brahman* is known in the sense that it is known to exist. The word "*Brahman*" is derived from the [Sanskrit] root *brih*, which means "to be great" [or "the greatest"]. Thus, *Brahman* ["the greatest"] must exist and must be all-knowing, all-powerful, eternally pure, intelligent, and free.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the existence of *Brahman* is known on the ground of its being the Self of everyone. Everyone is conscious of the existence of his own Self, and no one ever thinks "I am not." If the existence of the Self were not known, everyone would think "I am not."<sup>3</sup> This Self, of whose existence we are all conscious, is *Brahman*.

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<sup>1</sup>The first of the *Vedanta Sūtras* is "then therefore the desire of knowledge of *Brahman*."

<sup>2</sup>This argument suggests the so-called "ontological argument" for the existence of God set forth by Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109 AD). The gist of the argument is that the non-existence of the greatest conceivable being ("that than which nothing greater can be conceived") is impossible because the idea of a non-existent superlative being is self-contradictory. A non-existent being simply is not the greatest conceivable being. Shankara seems to be thinking about *Brahman* in this way.

<sup>3</sup>According to René Descartes (1596-1650 AD), I cannot think that I do not exist because, if I am thinking, then I must exist. "I think; therefore, I am." Shankara is apparently thinking along the same lines here.

But (someone might say) if *Brahman* is generally known as the Self, then there is no room for an inquiry into it. Not so! There is a conflict of opinions as to the specific nature of the Self. Some of these opinions are as follows: (1) The body endowed with the quality of intelligence is the Self [a materialist view, also held by many unlearned people]; (2) The organs endowed with intelligence [brain, heart, etc.] are the Self [another materialist view]; (3) The internal organ [the brain and central nervous system] is the Self [yet another materialist view]; (4) The Self is a mere momentary idea [a Buddhist view]; (5) The Self is the Void [another Buddhist view]; (6) The Self is a transmigrating being different from the body — both the producer and the experiencer of the consequences of action [a Hindu view based on Nyaya philosophy]; (7) The Self is a transmigrating being different from the body, which is the experiencer of the fruits of action, but which does not engage in action [another Hindu view based on Samkhya philosophy]; (8) There are individual selves (souls) as well as an all-knowing, all-powerful cosmic Self ("the Lord God") [another Hindu view based on Yoga philosophy]; (9) *Brahman* ("the Lord") is the true Self of the individual, whose individual soul is an appearance only, a product of ignorance [the Vedanta view].

Thus, there are many opposing views as to the nature of the Self. Some of these are based on sound arguments and scriptural texts, and some are based on fallacious arguments and scriptural texts misunderstood. Therefore, a man who embraces one of these opinions without careful thought and consideration may well bar himself from the highest bliss and may indeed suffer terrible loss. For this reason [an inquiry into the nature of *Brahman* and into the relationship between *Brahman* and the Self is necessary.]

### The relationship between *Brahman* and Self

According to the second Vedanta Sutra, "*Brahman* is that from which the origin, subsistence, and dissolution of this world proceed." The full sense of this Sutra is that the omniscient and omnipotent cause of the origin, subsistence, and dissolution of this world is *Brahman*. It is the task of the *Vedanta Sutras* to set forth the nature of *Brahman*, and they perform that task by teaching us that *Brahman* is eternal, all-knowing, absolutely self-sufficient, ever pure, intelligent and free, pure knowledge, absolute bliss. Devout meditation on *Brahman* results in final release (*moksha*), [and] this final release [brings us to a state of being that] is eternal in the true sense, omnipresent as the ether, free from all changes, absolutely self-sufficient, not composed of parts, self-illuminating [that is, being its own source of the light that reveals truth to consciousness]. It is, therefore, *the same as Brahman*. There are, in fact, many passages in the Scriptures that affirm that final release follows immediately from the knowledge of *Brahman* [and constitutes union with *Brahman*], for example, "He who knows *Brahman* becomes *Brahman*" (*Mundaka Upanishad*, III, 2, 9). The same is affirmed in the *Nyaya Sutras*: "Final release results from the successive removal of wrong knowledge, faults, activity, birth, pain, the removal of each later member of the series depending on the removal of the preceding member" (*Nyaya Sutras*, I, 1, 2); and wrong knowledge itself is removed by the knowledge of *one's Self being one with the Self of Brahman* . . . .

[The Scriptures make it clear that the union of Self with *Brahman* is not merely a combination or joining of two different things. On the contrary, the Scriptures teach that Self and *Brahman* are really identical:] "That [that is, *Brahman*] thou art" (*Tat tvam asi*) (*Chandogya Upanishad*, VI, 8, 7); "I am *Brahman*" (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, I, 4, 10); "This Self is *Brahman*" (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, II, 5, 19) . . . .

[The true Self revealed in the Scriptures can be thought of as the "soul" (*purusha*) as long as we do not confuse it with the psyche or ego (*jiva, jivatman*).] This "soul" is merely the witness of the psyche and ego; it is permanent in all transitory beings, unitary, eternally unchanging, the Self of everything. And as it is the Self of all, it can neither be pursued nor avoided. All perishable things indeed perish, but the "soul" is imperishable and eternally unchanging; hence it is in its essence eternally pure and free . . . .

It is impossible for a man who has once understood *Brahman* to be the Self to belong to the transmigratory world in the same sense as he did before because that would be contrary to the fact of his being *Brahman*. We indeed observe that a person who imagines the body to constitute the Self is subject to fear and pain, but we have no right to assume that the same person, after having comprehended *Brahman* to be the Self and thus having got over his former imaginings, will still in the same manner be subject to pain and fear, whose cause is ignorance. Thus, the Scriptures declare, "When he is free of the body, then neither pleasure nor pain touches him" (*Chandogya Upanishad*, VIII, 12, 1) . . . .

The embodiedness of the Self is not real, and the belief that it is caused by ignorance. A person who has reached true knowledge [that is, knowledge of the identity of *Brahman* and *Atman*] is free from his body even while still alive.

Therefore, the man who has once comprehended *Brahman* to be the Self does not belong to this transmigratory world as he did before; whereas he who still belongs to this transmigratory world has not comprehended *Brahman* to be the Self . . . .

*Brahman* is experienced in two forms: (1) as qualified by limiting conditions owing to the multiplicity of the names and forms arising out of the cosmic evolutionary process (that is, the plurality of the created world); and (2) as being the opposite of this, that is, free from all limiting conditions whatsoever. [Many passages of Scripture] declare *Brahman* to possess a double nature depending on whether it is the object either of knowledge or of ignorance. As long as it is the object of ignorance, it is viewed as the object of the devotion of individual souls [whereas in reality these souls and *Brahman* are one]. Although one and the same Self is hidden in all beings, yet owing to the gradual rise of understanding in the minds which form the limiting conditions of the Self, the Scriptures declare that the Self, although eternally unchanging and uniform, reveals itself in a graduated series of beings, and so appears in various forms of dignity and power.<sup>1</sup> [And thus] we see that, in ordinary life, the Self (which in reality is never anything but the Self) is, because of ignorance of the truth, identified with the Not-Self (for example, the body, the ego, and so on) . . . .

[Thus,] *Brahman* has been shown to be the source of the ether and the other elements and the cause of the origin, subsistence, and reabsorption of the entire world. Moreover, certain qualities have been attributed to this *Brahman* (which is the cause of the entire world), and among these qualities are all-pervadingness, eternity, omniscience, its being the Self of all, and so on . . . .

That same *Brahman* constitutes — as we know from scriptural passages such as "that thou art" — the real nature of the individual soul, while its secondary nature, that is, that aspect of it which depends on fictitious limiting conditions, is not its real nature. For as long as the individual soul does not free itself from ignorance in the form of duality (which ignorance may be compared to the mistake of him who in the twilight mistakes a post for a man) and does not rise to the knowledge of the Self, whose nature is unchangeable, eternal consciousness (which expresses itself in the form, "I am *Brahman*"), so long it remains the individual soul. But when, discarding body, sense organs, and mind, it arrives, by means of Scripture, at the knowledge that it is not itself those things, but is the True, the Real, the Self, whose nature is pure intelligence; then knowing itself to be of the nature of unchangeable, eternal consciousness, it lifts itself above the false conception of being one with this body and realizes that it is the Self, whose nature is unchanging, eternal consciousness. And this is the real nature of the individual soul by means of which it arises from the body and appears in its own form.

Here, however, someone might object. How can that which is unchanging and eternal "arise" from the body and "appear" in its own true form? To this objection, we make the following reply:

Before the rise of critical thought and reflection, the nature of the individual soul, which is in reality pure light, is not discriminated from its limiting conditions consisting of body, senses, mind, sense-objects, and feelings and appears as consisting of the activities of seeing and so on. These characteristics of the individual soul are then mistakenly attributed to the highest Self — which is, in reality, eternally pure, intelligent, free, never-changing, one only, not in contact with anything, devoid of form. This misattribution is done just as the ignorant attribute blue color to the colorless ether . . . .

When, through the Scriptures, the soul is stimulated to think critically and reflectively, it thereby realizes that it is distinct from its limiting conditions [body, senses, etc.]. This realization marks the soul's rising from the body and its appearing in its own true nature, that is, the soul, through critical and reflective thinking, comprehends that its nature is the pure Self. Thus, belief in the embodiedness as opposed to the non-embodiedness of the Self is due merely to uncritical as opposed to critical thinking. The individual soul is therefore called "that whose true nature is unknown" merely because of the absence of critical and reflective thinking, and it is called "that whose true nature has become known" because of the presence of such thinking . . . .

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<sup>1</sup>George Thibaut explains this passage as follows: "All things are manifestations of the highest Self under certain limiting conditions, but occupying different places in an ascending scale. In insentient things, stones, [etc.] only the *satta*, the quality of being[,] manifests itself; in plants, animals, and men the Self manifests itself through the vital sap; in animals and men there is understanding; [but] higher thought [appears] in man alone." *Vedanta Sutras with the Commentary by Sankaracarya*, trans. George Thibaut, in *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. F. Max Muller, Vol. 34 (Part I) (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), fn p. 63.

Thus, the difference between the individual soul and the true Self is owing to wrong knowledge [ignorance] only, not to any reality, since, like ether, the true Self is not in real contact with anything. [Awakening to the true Self is like] a person who is conscious of having seen an elephant in a dream and of no longer seeing it when awake [and who] discards in the waking state the object which he had seen in his sleep, [while recognizing] himself when awake to be the same person who saw something in the dream. The whole process is similar to that by which an imagined snake is understood to be a rope as soon as the mind of the perceiver has freed itself from its mistaken imagination . . . .

## Critique of Other Philosophical Systems<sup>1</sup>

### Vedanta versus Samkhya

#### (1) *Brahman* as the cause of the world's existence

According to the sacred Scriptures (the *Vedas*), *Brahman* is the cause of the origin, subsistence, and dissolution of this world. This view is consistent with two kinds of causality: (1) substantial (or material) causality, in which a substance such as clay or gold is related to an earthen pot or golden ornament as cause to effect; and (2) efficient causality, in which the cause is an active agent such as a potter or goldsmith who shapes a substance such as clay or gold into an object such as an earthen pot or golden ornament. Which of these two kinds of causality applies when we say that *Brahman* is the cause of the world?

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#### Editorial Comment

Shankara's treatment of the idea that *Brahman* is the cause of the world's existence is very complicated and requires explanation. According to Shankara, *Brahman* alone is originally and ultimately real. Nothing can exist independently of *Brahman*. Thus, it would seem that *Brahman* is both the efficient and the material cause of the universe. That is, *Brahman* is the agent (efficient cause) that causes the world to be and also the substance of which the world is composed (or from which the world is projected) (material cause). For Shankara, the universe is not created "out of nothing" (*ex nihilo*) but out of *Brahman*.

There is, however, a problem here, with which Shankara and his followers have grappled. For Advaita Vedanta, *Brahman* is unchanging, whereas the world of experience (produced by and from *Brahman*) is evidently full of change. How is the changing universe related to the changeless *Brahman*? The problem does not arise with regard to efficient causation. It seems possible for an unchanging Supreme Being (*Brahman*) to command that the changing world exist ("Let there be light," and so forth). However, if *Brahman* is also the material (substantial) cause of the world, and if the world is changing, doesn't that mean that *Brahman* is also changing?

Shankara and his school distinguish between two kinds of material change: (1) *parinama* (change of substance, actual change) and (2) *vivarta* (change of appearance). (1) The following is an illustration of the *parinama* principle: Milk can be used to make cheese. In the process of cheese-making, the milk is transformed into cheese and becomes unrecoverable,

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<sup>1</sup>In the following debates between Vedanta and other schools of classical Indian philosophy, the Vedanta perspective is that maintained by Shankara.

There are nine schools of classical Indian philosophy (*darshana* = vision). Six of these — Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Purva-Mimamsa, and Vedanta (also known as "Uttara-Mimamsa") — accept the authority of the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, the *Vedas*, and are thus traditionally described as "orthodox" (*astika*). The other three schools — Buddhism (which itself includes several distinct philosophical traditions), Jainism, and Carvaka (a now defunct materialist school) — are traditionally considered "unorthodox" (*nastika*) because they do not accept the authority of the *Vedas*. In the course of time, the six orthodox schools came to be organized into three groupings of two schools each: Samkhya-Yoga, Nyaya-Vaisheshika, and Mimamsa-Vedanta.

i.e., once the cheese has been made, we cannot recover the milk. The milk has been changed into a substance other than itself. (2) For an example of the *vivarta* principle, consider the fashioning of a ring out of silver. In this case, the silver (the material cause) does not change into something other than itself. The silver now *appears* in the form of a ring, but it remains silver, and it could be refashioned into some other piece of jewelry. In a significant sense, the silver itself does not change when it is fashioned into a ring or other ornament. It continues to be what it is.

For Shankara, the relationship between *Brahman* and the world does not involve *parinama*. In producing the world, *Brahman* does not become the world. *Brahman* remains itself. However, in the process of creation, does *Brahman* take on the shape or form of the world, as does the silver that is used to make a ring? The *vivarta* concept comes closer to Shankara's understanding of the relationship between *Brahman* and the world. *Brahman* takes on the *appearance* of the world, as does the silver take on the appearance of a ring. But in taking on the appearance of a ring, the silver itself is molded and shaped into a certain form. For Shankara, this is not what happens in the *Brahman*-world relationship. Shankara denies that *Brahman*, as the material cause of the universe, changes in any way whatsoever. Thus, neither the *parinama* nor the *vivarta* view is satisfactory. They both presuppose that cause and effect are separate realities. In *parinama*, the material cause (e.g., milk) is transformed into a substance different from itself (e.g., cheese); and in *vivarta*, the material cause (e.g., silver) is changed into the shape of its material effect (e.g., a ring). Shankara's position is that the world is a mere appearance of *Brahman* caused by the powers of ignorance (*avidya*) and illusion (*maya*). There is no real creation. *Brahman* does not really act, nor does it change in any way.

Thus, for Shankara, it seems that *Brahman* is both the cause of the world's existence and *not* the cause of the world's existence. To avoid this apparent contradiction, Shankara utilizes a distinction between two ways in which the nature of *Brahman* is experienced and understood. This is the distinction between *Saguna Brahman* and *Nirguna Brahman*, "*Brahman* with attributes" and "*Brahman* without attributes" (see above, p. 232). *Saguna Brahman* is qualified by limiting conditions owing to the multiplicity of the names (mental entities) and forms (bodies) arising out of the cosmic evolutionary process (i.e., out of the plurality of the created world) and as possessing a plethora of attributes (e.g., truth, beauty, knowledge, consciousness, bliss, power); *Nirguna Brahman* is free from all limiting conditions whatever and devoid of all attributes. *Saguna Brahman* is the personal God of religion, an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-present creator of the world and a divine savior to whom we owe our love and devotion. *Nirguna Brahman* is the Transcendent Absolute, having none of the attributes associated with "God" in the various theistic religions of the world. *Nirguna Brahman* is, in essence, "the God beyond the God of theism," a designation promoted by Paul Tillich in his famous essay on "Theology and Symbolism."<sup>1</sup>

For Shankara, *Brahman* appears differently to different people depending on whether the Supreme Being is the object either of knowledge (*jñana*) or of ignorance (*avidya*). From the standpoint of ignorance, *Brahman* is viewed as the object of religious devotion ("God") by individual souls, whereas in reality (so says Shankara) these souls and *Brahman* are one. In Shankara's view, one and the same Self (*Atman*) is present, although hidden, in all beings.

Thus, Shankara holds that *Brahman*, when properly understood (i.e., from the standpoint of knowledge), is devoid of all attributes (*Nirguna Brahman*). When *Brahman* is described as possessing attributes such as truth, knowledge, or infinity, or when *Brahman* is described as Pure Being (*sat*), Pure Consciousness (*chit*), and Pure Bliss (*ananda*), these characterizations of *Saguna Brahman* (*Brahman* with attributes) are attempts to describe *Brahman* from the standpoint of ignorance. Such characterizations are, in reality, just words, and the true nature of *Brahman* cannot be described in words. The truth of the matter, according to Shankara, is that *Brahman's* true nature is completely devoid of any attributes.

When *Brahman* is said to be the efficient and material cause of the world's existence, it is *Saguna Brahman*, not *Nirguna Brahman*, that is so described. To speak of *Brahman* as the cause of the world presupposes a duality of *Brahman* and world, and such dualistic thinking is grounded on ignorance of the true nature of *Brahman* and *Atman*. Although *Brahman* is characterized in various Vedic texts as the efficient and material cause of the universe, Shankara holds that these texts refer to *Saguna Brahman* and that thinking of *Brahman* as *Saguna* ("with attributes") constitutes only a

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Tillich, "Theology and Symbolism," in *Religious Symbolism*, ed. F. Ernest Johnson (New York: The Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1955), 114.

preliminary view of *Brahman*, a view based on the human need to explain the apparent existence of the universe. However, in order to understand the true nature of *Brahman*, we must go beyond this preliminary view and understand *Brahman* as it is in itself, not in relation to the universe, i.e., in non-dualistic terms. At that level of comprehension, it is seen that the entire universe is nothing but a superimposition upon and mere appearance of *Brahman*, the underlying reality of all that is. In the knowledge of the true nature of reality, which is the *Brahman-Atman* unity, this superimposition is "sublated." (Sublation is the process of correcting our understanding by replacing false judgments with true judgments.)

This line of argument leads Shankara to his famous distinction between two levels of reality and understanding: (1) phenomenal or relative reality (*vyavaharika satya*), in which dualities and distinctions appear, and (2) transcendental and absolute reality (*paramarthika satya*), in which there are no dualities or distinctions whatsoever. It is only from the phenomenal and relative standpoint of dualistic and distinctionist thought that *Brahman* (i.e., *Saguna Brahman*) is the cause of the existence of the universe. From the standpoint of absolute reality and understanding, there is nothing in existence other than the *Brahman-Atman* unity. Thus, in one sense, *Brahman* is the cause of the world's existence and, in another sense, *Brahman* is *not* the cause of the world's existence.

For the purposes of his arguments against Samkhya philosophy, Shankara adopts the phenomenal-relative perspective, insisting that, if we are to posit the existence of the universe as a product of causation, then we must conclude that *Brahman-Atman* (i.e., in the guise of *Saguna Brahman*) is both the efficient *and* the material cause of the world.

The controversy between Shankara (defending the Vedanta perspective) and the Samkhya school proceeds as follows:

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**Samkhya:** *Brahman* is the efficient but not the material cause of the world.<sup>1</sup> (1) Scripture declares that *Brahman's* creative energy is preceded by reflection (for example, *Prasna Upanishad*, VI, 3, 4). Now, observation shows that it is only the actions of efficient causes such as potters and the like that are preceded by reflection; material causes (such as clay) are not capable of reflection. Thus, the prime creator of the world must be an efficient cause, not a material cause. (2) The Scriptures also speak of *Brahman* as "the Lord." Now, lords such as kings are known only as efficient causes. Therefore, the highest Lord (*Brahman*) must be viewed as an efficient cause only. (3) This world, which is the effect of the creator's activity, consists of parts and is both non-intelligent and impure. We must therefore assume that the material cause of the world is of the same nature, for it is a matter of general observation that cause and effect are alike in kind (*satkaryavada*). But the Scriptures make it clear that *Brahman* has a nature that does not resemble the world, for *Brahman* is described as "without parts, without actions, tranquil, without fault, without flaw" (*Svetasvatara Upanishad*, VI, 19).

Therefore, in addition to *Brahman*, there exists a material cause of the world that has an impure nature [namely, the *pradhana* or *prakriti* argued for in the Samkhya texts]; the causality of *Brahman* must be limited to efficient causality.

**Vedanta:** *Brahman* is the material cause as well as the efficient cause of the world. (1) This view is consistent with what is set forth in many passages of Scripture. For example, in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (VI, 1, 3) the following question appears: "Have you ever asked for that instruction by which we hear what cannot be heard, by which we perceive what cannot be perceived, by which we know what cannot be known?" This passage implies that through the knowledge of one

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<sup>1</sup>Samkhya (and Yoga) philosophy is based on a dualistic metaphysics. There are two fundamental and co-eternal realities: *prakriti* (also known as the *pradhana*, which is the term used by Shankara herein) and *purusha*. *Prakriti* is primal matter, Not-Self, and object; *purusha* is pure consciousness, Self, and Subject (the Samkhya-Yoga version of *Brahman-Atman*). *Purusha* is completely other than and independent of *prakriti*, and yet its very existence disturbs the equilibrium of *prakriti*, which then generates the world out of itself by way of a cosmic evolutionary process. Thus, for Samkhya-Yoga, *purusha* (*Brahman-Atman*) is the efficient cause of the world's existence, while *prakriti* is its material cause.

Shankara's version of Vedanta philosophy is known as *Advaita* (Non-Dualism). For him, there are not two fundamental realities; *Brahman-Atman* alone is "really real." The world exists only as an appearance of *Brahman-Atman*, and *Brahman-Atman* is therefore both the efficient and the material cause of the world.

thing everything else, even if previously unknown, becomes known. Now, the knowledge of everything is possible through the knowledge of the material cause since an effect is not different from its material cause [for example, an earthen pot (effect) is not different in substance from clay (its material cause)], whereas effects *are* different from their efficient causes, for we know from ordinary experience that the carpenter, for example, is different [in substance] from the house he has built. Consider also the statement in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (IV, 5, 6), "When the Self has been seen, heard, perceived, and known, then all this is known." Similar statements and illustrative examples are to be found throughout the *Upanishads*, and they all strongly suggest that *Brahman* is the material cause of the world . . . .

(2) *Brahman* is also the efficient cause of the world because there is no other guiding being that could cause the world to be. Ordinarily, material causes such as lumps of clay and pieces of gold cannot shape themselves into vessels and ornaments, but are dependent on external efficient causes such as potters and goldsmiths; but outside *Brahman* as material cause there is no other efficient cause to which the material cause could look; for Scripture says that before the creation of the world *Brahman* was one without a second . . . .

*Brahman* is thus the efficient cause of the world, because there is no other ruling principle, and also the material cause because there is no other substance from which the world could originate . . . .

**Samkhya:** The Vedantic opinion that the intelligent *Brahman* is the material cause of this world is untenable because the effect would in that case be of an altogether different character from the cause. For this world, which the Vedantin considers as the effect of *Brahman*, is non-intelligent and impure and therefore different in character from *Brahman*, whom the Scriptures declare to be intelligent and pure. But things of an altogether different character cannot stand to each other in the relation of material cause and effect. For example, such effects as golden ornaments do not have earth for their material cause, nor is gold the material cause of earthen vessels; on the contrary, effects of an earthy nature originate from earth and effects of the nature of gold from gold. In the same manner, this world, which is non-intelligent and composed of pleasure, pain, and numbness,<sup>1</sup> can only be the effect of a cause that is itself non-intelligent and composed of pleasure, pain, and numbness. Therefore, this world cannot have its material cause in *Brahman* from which it is altogether different in character . . . .

**Vedanta:** Scripture tells us that this world has originated from an intelligent cause. Therefore, starting from the observation that the attributes of the cause survive in the effect, *I assume this whole world to be intelligent*. The apparent absence of consciousness and intelligence in various aspects of the world is a result of various states in which various things exist. Just as undoubtedly intelligent beings do not manifest their intelligence in certain states such as sleep, swoon, etc., so the intelligence of wood and earth also is not manifest even though it exists . . . .

**Samkhya:** This reasoning, if sound, might remove to a certain extent that difference of character between *Brahman* and the world which is due to the circumstance of the one being intelligent and the other non-intelligent. However, there would still remain that other difference which results from the fact that the one is pure and the other impure [consisting of a mixture of pleasure, pain, and numbness] . . . .<sup>2</sup>

**Vedanta:** [W]e see that from man, who is acknowledged to be intelligent, non-intelligent things such as hair and nails originate, and that, on the other hand, from avowedly non-intelligent matter, such as cow-dung, scorpions and similar animals are produced.

**Samkhya:** But the real cause of the non-intelligent hair and nails is the human body, which is itself non-intelligent, and only the non-intelligent bodies [not the souls] of scorpions are the effects of non-intelligent dung.

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<sup>1</sup>According to the Samkhya-Yoga metaphysical perspective, *prakriti* (the *pradhana*) contains within itself three fundamental forces or tendencies (*gunas*): *sattva*, the source of light and pleasure; *rajas*, the source of activity and pain; and *tamas*, the source of inertia and numbness. When the three *gunas* are in balance or equilibrium, nothing arises; but when that balance or equilibrium is disturbed by *prakriti's* reactions to *purusha*, then a world in which the *gunas* are intermingled in numerous ways emerges out of *prakriti*.

<sup>2</sup>Does Shankara ever answer this Samkhya objection?



**Vedanta:** Even so, there remains a difference in character between the cause (for example, the dung) and the effect (for example, the body of the scorpion) in so far as some non-intelligent matter (the body) is the seat of an intelligent principle (the scorpion's soul), while other non-intelligent matter (the dung) is not. Moreover, the difference of nature (due to the cause passing over into the effect) between the bodies of men on the one side and hair and nails on the other side is, on account of the divergence of color, form, etc., very considerable after all. The same holds true with regard to cow-dung and the bodies of scorpions. If absolute equality were necessary in the case of one thing being the effect of another, the relation of material cause and effect (which after all requires a distinction between the two) would be destroyed . . . .

**Samkhya:** [But] in the case of men and hair as well as that of scorpions and cow-dung there is one characteristic feature found in the effect as well as in the cause, namely, the quality of being of an earthy nature.

**Vedanta:** The same is true of *Brahman* and the world: they share the characteristic feature of existence (*satta*) . . . .

## (2) The primal cause of the world must be intelligent

**Samkhya:** Just as jars, dishes, and other products which are made of clay are seen to have for their material cause clay in general; so we must assume that the things and events in the world — which are blendings of pleasure, pain, and numbness — have for their material cause something containing pleasure, pain, and numbness in general. Pleasure, pain, and numbness constitute the threefold *pradhana*. This *pradhana*, which is non-intelligent, [is agitated by *purusha* and thus] evolves [and gives rise to worlds] in order to serve the purposes of the intelligent Soul [*purusha*] (to experience the world, to gain release from the world, etc.) . . . .<sup>1</sup>

**Vedanta:** [What you are describing is never] observed in the world. What we find in experience is that houses, palaces, couches, pleasure-centers, and the like (that is, things that support the pursuit of pleasure or the avoidance of pain) are always made by workmen endowed with intelligence. Now, look at this entire world which appears, on the one hand, as inanimate in the form of earth and the other elements that enable souls to enjoy the fruits of their various activities and, on the other hand, as animate in the form of living bodies possessing a definite [and intricate] arrangement of organs and which are therefore capable of providing homes for active, purposive souls; look, we say, at this world, whose intricacies are beyond the comprehension of even the most ingenious minds, and then explain how it could be brought into being by an inherently non-intelligent principle like the *pradhana*! Other non-intelligent things such as stones and lumps of earth are certainly not capable of such a feat [that is, of shaping themselves into a well-designed product]. Just as clay and similar substances can be fashioned into various forms only by potters and the like, so we must assume that the world could be fashioned out of the *pradhana*, not by the non-intelligent *pradhana* itself, but only by some intelligent principle. It is impossible to trace the orderly arrangement of the world to a non-intelligent primal cause [such as the *pradhana*] . . . .<sup>2</sup>

## (3) How can the *pradhana* be activated by *purusha*?

**Vedanta:** According to the Samkhyas, the *pradhana* is initially composed of the three *gunas* in a state of perfect equilibrium. Beyond the *pradhana* there is no external force that can either activate the *pradhana* or prevent its activity. The Soul (*purusha*) is indifferent; it neither moves nor restrains. Since the *pradhana* has no relationship with anything outside

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<sup>1</sup>According to the Samkhya-Yoga system, there is no real relationship or interaction between *purusha* and *prakriti* (the *pradhana*). *Prakriti* is disturbed and agitated by the mere existence of *purusha*; the equilibrium of the three *gunas* is disrupted; and there then arises within *prakriti* what the Samkhya-Yoga philosophers call "the Great Principle" (*Maha*), which is a reflection of the intelligence of *purusha* (but actually having the nature of *prakriti*). This reflection then becomes aware of itself as the ego-maker (*ahamkara*), out of which individual egos and minds evolve. The reflection of *purusha* in *prakriti* is then taken (by *purusha*?) to be *purusha* itself. This confusion of *purusha* with *prakriti* is a great mistake (based on ignorance) that leads *purusha* to seek experience of and then release from the world.

<sup>2</sup>To understand the point of many of Shankara's criticisms of Samkhya-Yoga, it must be kept in mind that, from the Samkhya-Yoga point of view, *purusha* does not in any way guide or direct the *pradhana* (*prakriti*) in the production of worlds. The *pradhana* (in reaction to the mere existence of *purusha*) produces from within itself worlds in which the light (intelligence) of *purusha* is reflected. *Purusha* is in no way actively involved in this process of cosmic evolution.

itself, it is impossible to understand why it should sometimes depart from a state of equilibrium and transform itself into a world and why it should sometimes not do this [but rather remain in the state of equilibrium] . . . .

**Samkhya:** Just as grass, herbs, water, etc., independently of any external cause just naturally transform themselves into milk, so, we assume, the *pradhana* also transforms itself. If you ask how we know that grass, etc., transform themselves [into milk] independently of any external cause, our answer is that no such external cause is observed. If we did observe some such cause, we would certainly apply it to grass, etc., in order to produce milk through our own deliberate efforts. But as a matter of fact we are unable to do such a thing. Thus, the transformation of grass, herbs, water, etc., [into milk] must be considered to be due to their own [internal] natures only. From these considerations, we infer that the transformation of the *pradhana* is of the same kind . . . .

**Vedanta:** That inference might stand if we really could agree that grass, herbs, etc., modify themselves [into milk] as you allege; but we are unable to agree with you, since an external cause of that process *is* observed. Grass becomes milk only when it is eaten by a cow or some other female animal, not if it is left either uneaten or is eaten by a bull. If the transformation had no special external cause, then grass, etc., could become milk even without entering a cow's body.

Moreover, if it were true that we cannot produce milk ourselves [by simply mixing grass and the other elements together in a certain way], that would not prove that there is no external cause of the transformation we are discussing, for while some effects can be produced by human effort, others result from divine action only. However, in this instance, the fact is that we can, by using a means in our power, produce milk from grass and other elements. It's very simple to do so: when we want a more abundant supply of milk, we can feed our cows more plentifully and thus obtain more milk from them. For these reasons, the spontaneous modification of the *pradhana* cannot be legitimately inferred from the example of the transformation of grass, etc., into milk . . . .

#### (4) How can the *pradhana* serve the purposes of *purusha*?

**Vedanta:** Even if we went along with your view that the *pradhana* is spontaneously active, we would still object to your claim that the activity of the *pradhana* is aimed at serving the purposes of the soul (*purusha*). For if the activity of the *pradhana* is truly spontaneous, that is, not an effect of an external [intelligent] cause [such as *Brahman*], then how can the activity of the [non-intelligent] *pradhana* have reference to any purpose or motive . . . ?

[Furthermore, just what purposes of the soul could be served by a world produced by the spontaneous activity of the *pradhana*? There are three possibilities:] (1) experience of all the pleasures and pains of life; or (2) final release from the world; or (3) both the enjoyment of all the pleasures and pains of life and (thereafter) release from the world.

(1) How is it possible for the soul to (really) experience the pleasures and pains of life since it is not actually present in the world and is naturally above and beyond the experience of pleasure and pain? Moreover, if the only purpose served by the *pradhana* is the soul's experience of the world, then there can be no final release [since the soul, which (according to Samkhya-Yoga) has an entirely inactive nature, cannot itself aim at release and since, under (1), the activity of the *pradhana* is aimed only at the soul's experience of the world].

(2) If the only purpose served by the activity of the *pradhana* is the soul's release from the world, then that activity is pointless since, prior to such activity, the soul is already in the state of release. Moreover, there would then be no reason for the *pradhana* to generate perceptions of the world [since the only point under (2) is the soul's release from, not its experience of, the world].

(3) If the purposes served by the activity of the *pradhana* are both the soul's full experience of the world and then, subsequently, its release from the world, then release would be impossible because the world contains an infinite number of objects and events to be experienced by the soul [and it would take forever to complete such a process of experience] . . . .

[For these and other reasons,] it is impossible to maintain that the activity of the *pradhana* serves any purposes of the soul . . . .

#### (5) How can *purusha* move the *pradhana*?

**Samkhya:** [L]et us say that, as a lame man who can see but cannot move can mount the back of a blind man who can move but cannot see and cause the blind man to move, or as an unmoving magnet moves iron, so the soul moves the *pradhana*.

**Vedanta:** Now you are giving up your earlier position, according to which the *pradhana* moves from within itself and the soul, which is inactive and detached from the *pradhana*, has no moving power. How can the inactive and detached soul move the *pradhana*? The lame man mentioned above may be able to cause the blind man to move by means of words and the like, but the soul, which is completely inactive and without any definable attributes, cannot possibly move anything . . . .

[Thus,] since the *pradhana* is non-intelligent, and since the soul is inactive and detached, and since there is no third principle or force to connect them, it follows that there can be no connection of the two [which would mean that *purusha* cannot move the *pradhana*] . . . .

#### (6) The impossibility of activity in the *pradhana*

**Vedanta:** Here is another reason for thinking that activity on the part of the *pradhana* is impossible: The *pradhana* initially consists of the three *gunas* (*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*) co-existing in a state of perfect equilibrium. In that state, the *gunas*, each of which is completely independent of the others, cannot enter into relations of inferiority or superiority with one another, and since there is no external principle or force to stir them up, the initiation of activity in the *pradhana* and the consequent evolution of a world seems impossible . . . .

**Samkhya:** But we do not acknowledge the *gunas* to be entirely independent of one another and unchangeable. There is no proof for such an assumption. We rather infer that the characteristics of the *gunas* can be seen in their [observable] effects [in the empirical world], and we assume that their nature must be such as to render the production of their effects possible. Now, we hold that the *gunas* are naturally unstable and therefore capable of entering into relations of superiority and inequality with one another, even while they are in a state of equilibrium.

**Vedanta:** Even so, the objections stated above based on the impossibility of an orderly arrangement of the world evolving out of the non-intelligent *pradhana* remain in force. And if, in order to avoid those objections, the Samkhyas should infer from the orderly arrangement of the world that the primal cause is intelligent, they would then cease to be our opponents since the doctrine that there is a single intelligent [primal] cause of the world is nothing other than the Vedantic doctrine of *Brahman*.

Moreover, if the *gunas* were capable of entering into relations of mutual inequality even while in a state of equilibrium, this could be explained in only one of the following two ways: either the *gunas* would be in a condition of inequality as the effect of some efficient cause; or, if they were in that condition [but not as the effect of an efficient cause], they would always remain in it because the absence of an efficient cause would be a permanent (unchanging) circumstance . . . .

#### (7) The Samkhya critique of Vedanta

**Samkhya:** The [non-dualistic] system of Vedanta is itself objectionable; for it does not acknowledge that that which suffers and that which causes suffering are two different kinds of beings. Those who claim that the one *Brahman* is the Self of everything and the [efficient as well as material] cause of the whole world must also hold that the two attributes of being that which causes suffering and being that which suffers belong to one and the same supreme Self (not to two different kinds of beings). Now, if these two attributes belong to one and the same Self, it can never divest itself of them (no more than a lamp, as long as it exists as such, can be divested of the two properties of giving heat and light), and thus Scripture, which teaches perfect knowledge for the purpose of the cessation of all suffering, loses all its meaning . . . .

[I]f the Vedantin should mention the sea with its waves, ripples, foam, etc., as an illustration of a case where attributes pass away while the substance remains, we would then point out that waves, ripples, etc., constitute attributes of

the sea that remain permanently, although they are sometimes manifest and at other times in a state of non-manifestation. The sea is never really devoid of waves, no more than the lamp is ever devoid of heat and light.

Moreover, it is well known from ordinary experience that that which causes suffering and that which suffers are two different kinds of beings. More generally, we commonly consider the person desiring and the thing desired to be separate entities. If the object of desire were not essentially different and separate from the person desiring, the state of being desirous could not be ascribed to the latter because the object with reference to which alone he can be called desirous would already belong to him as part of his essence in the same way that a lamp's light belongs to its essence. Want or desire can exist only if the thing wanted or desired is not yet possessed.

Just as there could be no desiring person unless the object of desire and the desiring person were essentially separate, so the object of desire also would cease to be an object for the desiring person and would be an object for itself only. As a matter of fact, however, this is not the case; for the two ideas, "object of desire" and "desiring person," imply a relationship of correlation [between the person and the object], and a relationship must exist between two [or more] things, not in one thing only. Thus, the desiring person and the object of desire must be separate entities.

The same is true with regard to what is not desired (objects of aversion = *anartha*) and the non-desiring person (*anarthin*). That which causes suffering is an object of aversion to a person who suffers; such a person wants to avoid or be delivered from the various causes of suffering. If that which causes suffering and he who suffers are one and the same Self (as Vedanta teaches), it follows that final release [from suffering] is impossible. However, if we assume that the cause of suffering and the sufferer are two different and separate beings, then release is possible since the [general] cause of the relationship between the two (that is, ignorance [of the real difference between *prakriti* and *purusha*]) may be removed.

**Vedanta:** All this argumentation is off-target. Since the Self is a perfect unity, there cannot be, within the Self, any relationship between the cause of suffering and the sufferer. Our doctrine would be vulnerable to your objection if that which causes suffering and that which suffers did, while belonging to one and the same Self, stand to each other in the relationship of object and subject. However, because they are one, they do not stand in that [or any other] relationship. Fire, although it possesses various attributes such as heat and light and is capable of change, gives off heat and light, but it does not burn or cast light on itself since it is one only. How, then, can the one unchangeable *Brahman* enter within itself into the relationship of cause of suffering and sufferer?

Where, then, does the relationship between sufferer and cause of suffering exist? That, we reply, is not difficult to see. [It exists in the phenomenal world, that is, the world of appearances, which, for Vedanta, is only provisionally real, not "really real." In the phenomenal world,] it is the living body that suffers (for example, a sunburn), and the suffering is caused by some entity other than the body (for example, the sun).

**Samkhya:** But burning is a pain, and pain can be experienced by an intelligent being only, not by a non-intelligent body. Furthermore, if pain were merely an affection of the body, it would, on the destruction of the body, cease of itself; there would be no point in seeking for [spiritual] means [for example, through the teachings of the *Vedas*] to make it cease.

**Vedanta:** But we never actually observe a purely intelligent being destitute of a body (a soul) being burned and suffering pain. And I don't think that you (the Samkhya) would want to say that a purely intelligent being (soul) can be burned or experience pain since, from your point of view, there can be no real connection between soul (*purusha*) and body (*prakriti*) because, through such a connection, the soul would be corrupted by impurity and similar imperfections [and that would be against the Samkhya theory of the soul's essential purity]. Nor does it make sense to say that suffering itself suffers.

How, then, can Samkhya explain the relationship between a sufferer and the causes of suffering? If you should argue that the *sattva-guna* is that which suffers and that the *guna* called passion (*rajas*) is the cause of suffering, we would again object because, according to your general viewpoint, the intelligent principle (the soul, *purusha*) cannot be really connected with the *gunas*. And if you should then say that the soul suffers as it were because it leans toward the *sattva-guna*, we would point out that the employment of the phrase, "as it were," shows that the soul does not really suffer . . .

You must therefore concede that the relationship between causes of suffering and sufferers is not real, but that it is rather the effect of ignorance [of the true nature of the Self]. And if you concede that, then you must also concede that the Vedantic perspective is immune to your objections . . . .<sup>1</sup>

For Vedanta, the true Self (*Atman*) is a perfect unity, and such a unity cannot, within itself, enter into the relationship of subject and object. [Thus, in the *Brahman-Atman*, there are neither sufferers nor causes of suffering, neither desiring nor objects of desire.] With regard to the phenomenal world, we admit the relationship between sufferer and cause of suffering just as it is observed, and we have no need to object to it or to refute it . . . .

## Vedanta versus Vaisheshika (Atomism)<sup>2</sup>

**Vedanta:** We have now refuted the Samkhya doctrine that holds the non-intelligent *pradhana* to be the material cause of the world. Next, we will dispose of the atomic theory of the Vaisheshikas. We begin by refuting an objection raised by the atomists against Vedanta . . . .

### (1) Can Brahman be the material cause of the world?

**Vaisheshika:** The qualities of an effect must be the same as the qualities of its [material] cause. For example, white cloth is produced from white threads; white threads cannot produce cloth of a different color. Thus, if *Brahman*, which is intelligent, is the [material] cause of the world, we should find that the world is also intelligent. But this is not the case. Therefore, *Brahman* cannot be the material cause of the world.

**Vedanta:** This argument is undermined by the Vaisheshika system itself. According to that system, atoms, which are the basic components of matter, are minute entities of spherical form. There are four classes of atoms: earth atoms, water atoms, fire atoms, and air atoms. When a world cycle (*kalpa*) ends in dissolution (*pralaya*), there follows a certain period during which each atom is isolated and motionless and produces no effects. Then, when the time for a new creation arrives, the "unseen principle" of creation (*adrishta*) stimulates the atoms to move and to enter into conjunction with one another thereby forming various atomic compounds (two-atom compounds, three-atom compounds, etc.), and by this means the four basic elements (earth, water, fire, and air) and an entire new world come into being. In this process, the atoms (material causes) pass their qualities on to the compounds (effects) they produce — for example, when two atoms produce a binary (two-atom) atomic compound, the special qualities belonging to the simple atoms, such as white color, produce a corresponding white color in the compound. However, while each atom is spherical and minute, the two-atom, three-atom, and more complex atomic compounds (including compounds of compounds) that are produced as a result of the process of atomic conjunction are not spherical and are (as the compounding process develops) less and less minute. [In other words, within the atomist system itself, the qualities of effects are not always the same as the qualities of their material causes.]

Well, then, just as spherical and minute atoms can be the material causes of effects that are not spherical and not minute (but rather, for example, long and big), so this non-intelligent world may have as its material cause the intelligent *Brahman*. This is a conclusion that the Vaisheshikas cannot, on their own principles, reject . . . .

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<sup>1</sup>According to the Samkhyas, Vedanta philosophy cannot account for the common sense distinction between beings suffering pain and things causing such suffering. In response, Shankara tries to show that, on Samkhya assumptions also, the fact of suffering remains inexplicable. Shankara's conclusion is that suffering is fictitious and thus unreal, a product of ignorance.

<sup>2</sup>As its name suggests ("*Vaisheshika*" = "particularity"), Vaisheshika philosophy emphasizes the pluralistic and particularistic nature of reality. The basic material components of the universe are the atoms, of which there are four kinds: earth atoms, water atoms, fire atoms, and air atoms. In addition to the atoms, there are five other (non-material) components of the universe: mind, soul (or self), ether, time, and space. The universe is a product of combinations of these nine fundamental components. By the 10th century AD, the Vaisheshika system, known for its atomistic metaphysics, had been synthesized with the Nyaya ("logic") system of classical Indian philosophy, which specialized in the fields of logic and epistemology. Thenceforth, the two schools have been classified together as the Nyaya-Vaisheshika tradition.

**Vaisheshika:** The analogy you draw is not a good one. It is, of course, true that a two-atom compound resulting from the conjunction of two spherical atoms cannot itself be spherical.<sup>1</sup> However, there is no reason why the world cannot manifest the intelligence of its material cause (assuming that its material cause is intelligent). Intelligence should produce an effect similar to itself . . . .

**Vedanta:** Our point is simply that just as causes with the qualities of sphericity, minuteness, and so on, do not necessarily produce effects with the same qualities, so intelligence as a cause may produce effects that are non-intelligent. To that extent, the two cases are analogous . . . .

## (2) What's wrong with Atomism?

**Vaisheshika:** [Our view is that the atoms are the material cause of the world.] All material things that consist of parts (for example, pieces of cloth) arise from a conjunction of their parts (for example, threads) [and can be dissolved into their parts]. That at which the division of wholes into parts stops and which marks the limit of division into more and more minute parts is the atom. This whole world, with its mountains, oceans, and so on, is composed of parts and is therefore reducible to atoms . . . .

Since there are four elementary material substances consisting of parts (earth, water, fire, and air), we must assume that there are four different kinds of atoms. The atoms, which mark the limit of subdivision of material things into smaller parts, are themselves indivisible [and indestructible]. Thus, when the material world is destroyed at the end of a world-cycle [of creation, being, and dissolution] it is not literally annihilated but simply broken down into its atomic components. This state of atomic dissolution of the world constitutes the *pralaya* (the periodic destruction of the world). After that, when the time for a new creation arrives, motion springs up in the atoms. This motion, which is brought about by the "unseen principle" (*adrishta*), joins one atom to another atom, and in this way atomic compounds are produced, which then give rise to the four basic elements (earth, water, fire, and air), out of which a new world evolves. Thus, the whole world originates from atoms . . . .

**Vedanta:** We oppose the doctrine of atomism for the following reasons: When the atoms are in a state of [motionless] dissolution [the *pralaya* state, in which each atom is isolated from all the others], they must begin to move in order to begin the process of conjunction [one atom being joined to another, and so on] that leads to the evolution of a world. But motion must itself arise from a prior efficient cause; and unless some such originating cause of motion exists, no motion can take place in the atoms . . . .<sup>2</sup>

[The Vaisheshika appeal to the so-called "unseen principle" (*adrishta*), which is posited as the cause of the original motion of the atoms, does not solve the problem. According to the Vaisheshika, the *adrishta* is non-intelligent. Now, as we have shown above in our critique of the Samkhya system, a non-intelligent thing that is not directed by an intelligent principle cannot of itself either move or be the cause of motion . . . .

Therefore, since there is no original efficient cause of motion, motion cannot take place in the atoms [when they are in the quiescent *pralaya* state]. Since there is no such motion, conjunction of the atoms (which depends on motion) cannot take place; and since there can be no conjunction of the atoms, none of the effects depending on it (the formation of atomic compounds, elements, etc.) can come to pass . . . .

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<sup>1</sup> ● + ● = ●●, and ●● is not a sphere although it is composed of two spheres.

<sup>2</sup>There follows at this point a series of very complicated arguments by Shankara purporting to show, in general, that the atomism of the Vaisheshika school makes no sense and, in particular, that the initial motion of the atoms is either inexplicable or impossible. Only a few of these arguments are included in this selection. For Shankara's full treatment of this subject, see the *Vedanta Sūtras with the Commentary by Sankaracarya*, trans. George Thibaut, in *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. F. Max Muller, Vol. 34 (Part I) (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), pp. 387-391.

Moreover, the atoms are either (1) essentially active or (2) essentially inactive, or (3) both essentially active and essentially inactive, or (4) neither essentially active nor essentially inactive. There is no fifth possibility. But none of these four alternatives is possible. If (1) the atoms are essentially active, their activity is permanent [eternal] so that no *pralaya* [a state in which the atoms are quiescent] could take place.<sup>1</sup> If (2) the atoms are essentially inactive, then their inactivity is permanent [eternal], and thus no creation [of the world] could take place [and if there is no creation, then the world cannot exist, nor can it be dissolved]. The atoms' being (3) both essentially active and essentially inactive is self-contradictory and therefore impossible. If (4) the atoms are neither essentially active nor essentially inactive, then their activity and inactivity must depend on an [external] efficient cause, and [we have already shown that the Vaisheshikas' candidate for the role of a primal efficient cause, that is, the *adrishta*, cannot, in fact, play that role effectively].<sup>2</sup>

### (3) Are the atoms really indivisible and immutable?

**Vaisheshika:** Let us suppose that all substances composed of parts are divided into their parts [and then the parts into parts, and so on]. A limit will finally be reached beyond which the process of division cannot continue. What constitutes that limit are the atoms, which are eternal and immutable, belong to four different classes [earth, water, fire, and air], possess color and other qualities, and are the originating components of this whole material world with its color, form, and other qualities.

**Vedanta:** The idea that the atoms have color and other qualities is inconsistent with the Vaisheshika claim that the atoms are minute [infinitesimally small] and immutable. If the atoms have color and other qualities, they must be [relatively] large and subject to change. Ordinary experience shows that whatever has color and other qualities is, compared to its cause, large and impermanent. For example, a piece of cloth is large compared to the threads of which it consists, and it is also impermanent because it can be reduced to its threads; and the threads again are impermanent and large compared to the filaments of which they are made up. Therefore, the atoms (which, according to the Vaisheshikas, have color and other qualities) must be the effects of more fundamental causes compared to which the atoms are large and impermanent . . . .

Furthermore, the element of earth has the qualities of smell, taste, color, and touch and is gross; the element of water has color, taste, and touch, and is fine; the element of fire has color and touch and is finer yet; the element of air is finest of all and has the quality of touch only. The question here is whether the atoms that constitute the four elements all possess the same number of qualities as the respective elements or whether some atoms have a greater number of said qualities while other atoms have a smaller number. Either assumption leads to unacceptable consequences.

If we assume that some kinds of atoms [for example, earth atoms] have more numerous qualities than others [for example, air atoms], it follows that their size will be increased thereby, and that implies that they are not, in fact, atoms [because they are not infinitesimally small]. An increase in the number of qualities cannot take place without a simultaneous increase of size . . . .

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<sup>1</sup>It could also be argued (although Shankara does not so argue) that, if the atoms are essentially and therefore always active, the world (which is a result of atomic activity) could not come into being but would rather exist eternally. On the assumption of the essential and thus permanent activity of the atoms, there could be neither creation nor dissolution of the world, contrary to the teachings of the *Vedas*.

<sup>2</sup>In arguing that the Vaisheshikas cannot account for the motion of the atoms or even show that such motion is possible, Shankara seems to see Vaisheshika atomism as non-theistic. Apparently, Shankara's criticisms are directed at the *Vaisheshika Sūtras* of Kanada (c. 3rd century AD) and perhaps at some of the early commentators on Kanada such as Shankara Misra and Candrakanta (4th century AD?). "Kanada . . . does not mention God, but later commentators [perhaps in response to criticisms like Shankara's] felt that the immutable atoms could not by themselves produce an ordered universe unless a presiding God regulated their activities" (Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore [eds.], *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957], p. 386). In the later Vaisheshika (and Nyaya) commentaries (such as those of Shridara and Udayana [10th century AD]), God [*Brahman*, *Brahma*, *Ishvara*, etc.] is the original source or first cause from which arises the *adrishta* ("unseen principle") that initiates the motion of the atoms, which, in turn, leads to the creation, sustenance, and dissolution of worlds, all in accordance with the will of God.

If, on the assumption that all atoms are equal, we say that there is no difference in the number of their qualities, we must either suppose that they all have just one quality or that they all have all four qualities [smell, taste, color, and touch].<sup>1</sup> If all atoms have one quality only, then we could not touch [and feel] fire; nor could we see color in or touch water; nor could we taste, touch, or find color in earth. There cannot be more qualities in an effect than there are in its cause. If all atoms have all of the four qualities, then we would find, contrary to our actual experience, smell in water, smell and taste in fire, smell, taste, and color in air . . . .

It thus appears that the philosophy of the Vaisheshikas is supported by very weak arguments, is opposed to those scriptural passages which declare *Brahman* to be the general [both efficient and material] cause [of the world], and is not accepted by any of the authorities who take their stand on Scripture (for example, Manu and others). Thus, it is to be altogether disregarded by conscientious people who are concerned about their own spiritual welfare . . . .

## Vedanta versus Buddhist Philosophy

[Shankara goes on to critique three schools of Buddhist philosophy: (1) the Realists (Sautrantikas and Vaibhashikas), who hold that both consciousness and the external material world are real; (2) the Idealists (Yogacara philosophers such as Vasubandhu), who maintain that consciousness-only is real; and (3) the Voidists (Madhyamikas such as Nagarjuna), who claim that everything is void or empty.]

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### Editorial Comment

To understand Shankara's criticisms of Buddhist philosophy, it is helpful to keep in mind his general view of reality (known as "non-dualism" [*advaita*]). For Shankara, *Brahman-Atman* alone is ultimately real, and *Brahman-Atman* is a spiritual, not a material, reality. Through the powers of ignorance (*avidya*) and illusion (*maya*), *Brahman-Atman*, which is a perfect unity, takes on the *appearance* of a pluralistic cosmos full of individual selves, various living beings, and material objects. This appearance, however, is not utterly unreal; it is itself real, but provisionally or relatively (not absolutely) so. When a rope is taken for a snake, the rope is really there, *really appearing* as a snake. There is one reality and one appearance, and these are neither completely the same ("one") nor completely different ("two"). They are not the same because the rope is not *really* a snake; neither are they different (two different things) because there is only one thing there. The rope and the snake are "not one," but they are "not two" either. Similarly, *Brahman-Atman* and its appearance, the phenomenal world, are "not one" and "not two."

Shankara's basic disagreements with Buddhist philosophy (based on his general world-view) are the following: (1) Shankara takes Buddhist Realism to hold that the duality of mind and matter is ultimately real, whereas, in Shankara's view, that duality is only provisionally real, merely an *appearance* of the fundamental non-duality of *Brahman-Atman*. (2) With regard to Buddhist Idealism, that is, Vasubandhu's Yogacara view that consciousness-only is real and that external, material objects do not exist, Shankara's position is that the subject-object, mind-matter distinction is real within the provisional reality of the world of appearances (the phenomenal world). Consciousness-only, in the form of *Brahman-Atman*, is *ultimately* real, but, at the phenomenal level, both consciousness *and* material objects exist in the sense of being provisionally real. (3) Buddhist Voidism (Nagarjuna's *Madhyamaka*) holds that all things are empty (*shunya*) of essence. For Shankara, all things are full of essence, that is, the essence of *Brahman-Atman*.

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<sup>1</sup>What about sound? Shankara holds that sound is a quality of ether (not of atoms).



## Buddhist Realism (Sautrantika & Vaibhashika)

### (1) The chain of interdependent causation

**Realism:** The external material world and the internal realm of consciousness (mind) are both real. The external world is composed of four basic elements — earth, water, fire, and air — which themselves arise from the aggregation of the four kinds of atoms [earth atoms, water atoms, fire atoms, and air atoms]. The four elements and things composed of them also have certain attributes such as color, etc. The internal [psychological] realm consists of five aggregates (*skandhas*): (1) the senses and their objects; (2) mind-other consciousness; (3) feeling (pleasure, pain, etc.); (4) verbal cognition (that is, recognition of things by their names); and (5) impressions. These five aggregates constitute the entire basis of all personal existence. [Everything that exists, both internally and externally, both mind and matter, is in a process of continual flux, existing only as a temporary event in a stream of "momentariness" (see footnote 1 on p. 246).]

**Vedanta:** The origins of these two aggregations — that of the external material world and that of the internal psychological realm — cannot be accounted for by the Buddhist Realists. Material things are devoid of intelligence, but minds are intelligent. How does intelligence arise? The Realists deny that there is any supreme and permanent intelligence, such as a ruling Lord (*Brahman*) or a cosmic Self (*Atman*), that could cause the aggregation of atoms and bring the realm of intelligent consciousness into being. Do the aggregation of the atoms and that of the *skandhas* "just happen" unceasingly, without being caused? It seems that the formation of these aggregations cannot be explained . . . .

**Realism:** Although there is no permanent intelligent principle such as *Brahman* or Self (*Atman*) to cause the formation of the external and internal aggregates, the course of worldly existence is made possible through the [chain of interdependent causation (discovered by the Buddha)]. We need not look for any other formative principle.

The [twelvefold] chain of interdependent causation, beginning with ignorance, is comprised of the following members: (1) ignorance [for example, taking the momentary (such as the self) to be permanent, which gives rise to] (2) impressions [and impulses to action, which give rise to] (3) consciousness, [which gives rise to] (4) [mind and body, which give rise to] (5) the six senses,<sup>1</sup> [which give rise to] (6) [sensations through the sense of] touch, [which give rise to] (7) feelings [of pleasure and pain, which give rise to] (8) desire and craving [for example, for more pleasure and less pain, which give rise to] (9) [clinging based on desire and craving, which gives rise to] (10) [becoming, the impulse to be,<sup>2</sup> which gives rise to] (11) birth (into a particular species), which gives rise to (12) decay, death, sorrow and grief, lamentation, physical and mental pain and suffering, tribulation of all sorts [all of which (once again) gives rise to ignorance, and the never-ending cycle of interdependent causation goes on]. [A]s the cycle continues, it forms uninterrupted chains of causes and effects that revolve unceasingly like water-wheels. For the cycle of interdependent causation to exist and go on, the aggregates that constitute matter and mind must exist [because matter and mind are the things that are enmeshed in the chain of causation].

**Vedanta:** We can't accept this explanation. It merely identifies efficient causes for the origination of the members of the chain [ignorance causes impressions and impulses, which cause consciousness, and so on]. It does not identify an efficient cause of the formation of the [material and mental] aggregates. The Realist says that the existence of the aggregates must be assumed in order to account for the existence of the chain of causation itself. If by that he means that the chain of causation cannot exist without the aggregates, then he must go on to identify the efficient cause of the formation of the aggregates. [If everything that exists, including the atoms, exists only momentarily, with no permanence whatsoever, how can the aggregates (or anything else) come into being in the first place?]

**Realism:** Let us then assume that the chain of causation is itself the efficient cause of the aggregates.

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<sup>1</sup>In addition to the five physical senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching, Indian thinkers consider mental perception (thinking) to be a form of sensation.

<sup>2</sup>This tenth link in the chain is not mentioned in Shankara's presentation of the Buddhist theory of causation.

**Vedanta:** But how can the chain of causation be the cause of that without which it itself is not capable of existence . . . ?

## (2) The doctrine of momentariness (*ksanika-vada*)<sup>1</sup>

Not only can the Realists' chain of causation theory not account for the existence of the material and mental aggregates that make up the world (according to them), but the view that one link in the chain is the efficient cause of the next link cannot be true if the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness is true. According to the doctrine of momentariness, when the thing existing in the second moment enters into being, the thing existing in the first moment ceases to be. If this is so, then the relationship between the two things [if there be any relationship at all] cannot be that of cause and effect since the first momentary existence has ceased to be (that is, has entered into non-existence) before the second momentary existence comes into being. Thus, the first momentary existence cannot be the cause of the second momentary existence [and the second cannot be the cause of the third, and so on] . . . .

**Realism:** [But] the first momentary existence, once it has reached its full development [completion], becomes the cause of the later momentary existence.

**Vedanta:** That is impossible; for the claim that a fully developed [completed] existence exerts a further energy assumes that it persists beyond its moment of being in order to be connected with a second moment [as cause to effect], which is inconsistent with the doctrine of universal momentariness.

**Realism:** Then let the mere existence of the first entity constitute its causal [effect-producing] power.

**Vedanta:** That won't work either because we cannot conceive of an effect that does not somehow reflect the nature of its cause, which means that the nature of the cause continues to exist (in the effect) beyond the cause's moment of existence. This is inconsistent with the doctrine of momentariness and, if true, would require the abandonment of that doctrine . . . .

**Realism:** [Perhaps] an effect may arise even when there is no cause.

**Vedanta:** That would require the abandonment of the Realist view [that everything that exists is caused to exist]. Moreover, if anything could come into being without a cause, then absolutely anything might just inexplicably pop into being at absolutely any time . . . .

**Realism:** [Perhaps] we may assume the prior momentary existence to last just until the succeeding one has been produced . . . .

**Vedanta:** That implies that cause and effect exist, at least briefly, at the same time, which is also inconsistent with the doctrine of momentariness . . . .

## (3) The phenomenon of remembrance versus momentariness

The philosopher who maintains that all things are momentary must extend that doctrine to the perceiving person also. But that is impossible because of the phenomenon of remembrance, which is a consequence of an earlier perception. Remembrance can take place only if it belongs to the same person who previously had the perception that is remembered. What one person has experienced is not remembered by another person. How, indeed, could anyone say, "I saw that thing, and now I see this thing," if the seeing person were not in both cases the same being?

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<sup>1</sup>The Sautrantika and Vaibhashika Buddhists subscribe to the doctrine of *ksanika-vada*, momentariness (or "the way of the momentary"), which is derived from the more generally accepted Buddhist doctrine of *anicca* (*anitya*). According to the doctrine of *anicca*, all things are transitory and impermanent. The Sautrantika-Vaibhashika doctrine of *ksanika-vada* is a radical extension of the *anicca* doctrine, holding that all things are not only transitory, continually changing, but also that nothing remains the same for even two consecutive moments.

It is well known that remembrance can take place only when the observing subject and the remembering subject are one and the same. If the two were different subjects, then the state of consciousness that arises in the mind of the remembering person would be, "I remember, but someone else had the original experience." But no such state of consciousness ever arises. Whenever anyone says, "I saw this or that," he knows he is the same person who had the original perception and who is now remembering it; it never occurs to him to deny [or even doubt] that it was he himself who had the past perception any more than he denies [or doubts] that fire is hot and gives light.

Since only one person is the subject of both the past perception and the subsequent remembrance, the Realist must necessarily abandon the doctrine of universal momentariness. If he recognizes all of his successive thoughts, up to his last breath, to belong to one and the same subject [that is, himself], and if he must attribute all of his past experiences, from the moment of his birth, to one and the same Self, then how can he maintain, without being ashamed of himself, that everything has a momentary existence only?

**Realism:** [T]he sense of the subject as one and the same arises because of the similarity between the two different states of consciousness [past perception and present remembrance], but each is momentary only . . . .

**Vedanta:** [T]he recognition of similarity requires the comparison of [at least] two different things, and for that reason [you], the advocate of universal momentariness who denies the existence of one continuing subject able mentally to grasp the two similar things, simply talk deceitful nonsense when you claim that remembrance is founded on similarity. If you should concede that there is a single mind grasping the similarity of two successive momentary existences, you would then have to admit that that one mind endures for two moments, which would contradict the doctrine of universal momentariness . . . .

**Realism:** [What if we say] that the judgment "this is similar to that" is a new state of consciousness, not dependent on the experience of the earlier and later momentary existences?

**Vedanta:** [That won't work either.] The fact that different terms — that is, "this" and "that" — are used implies the existence of two different things (which the mind grasps in a judgment of similarity). If the mental act that has similarity as its object were a completely new state of consciousness (not at all focused on the two separate but similar entities), then the expression "this is similar to that" would be meaningless . . . .

In general, whenever something perfectly well known on the basis of ordinary experience is not acknowledged by philosophers, they may indeed press their own view and demolish the contrary opinion by means of words, but they thereby convince neither others nor even themselves. Whatever has been established as "such and such" must also be represented as "such and such." Attempts to represent it as something else prove nothing but the vain verbosity of those who make those attempts. Thus, the hypothesis that similarity [between past experiences and present remembrances] can be recognized [without there existing a single subject of both states of consciousness] cannot account for ordinary empirical life and thought. When we recognize something, we judge it to be something that we have experienced before. We don't think that it is only *similar* to what we have experienced. Occasionally, of course, we may wonder whether something we are now observing is something we have observed before or only similar to it. After all, mistakes may be made concerning that which lies outside our minds. However, the conscious subject never wonders whether it is itself or only similar to itself. On the contrary, it is vividly aware of itself as one and the same subject that yesterday had a certain experience and today remembers that experience . . . .

## Buddhist Idealism (Yogacara)

**Vedanta:** [W]e are now confronted by those Buddhist philosophers (the Yogacara school) who maintain that only consciousness (mind) exists.

**Yogacara:** The doctrine of the reality of the external world was indeed set forth for consideration by the Buddha. He did this because he recognized that some of his disciples were attached to external things. However, his own true view was that consciousness alone is real . . . .

[T]he process of knowing — which includes (1) the act of knowing, (2) the object known, and (3) the result of knowledge — is completely internal, existing only in relation to the mind (*buddhi*). Even if external things existed, knowing could take place only in connection with the mind. We consider the entire process of knowing to be internal and mental, and we hold that no external things exist apart from consciousness, because the existence of external things is impossible. [Our arguments for this position are as follows:]

**Argument 1.** If external things exist, they must be either atoms or aggregates of atoms [such as posts, pillars, and other such objects]. But external objects cannot be [known to be] atoms because it is impossible for the mind to grasp things as minute as atoms. Nor can external objects be aggregates of atoms because such aggregates must be either different or not-different from atoms. [If they are different from atoms, then they are not atoms; and if they are not-different from atoms, then they are atoms and are too minute to be grasped by the mind.]

**Argument 2.** All ideas have the same nature, that is, they are all states of consciousness; but different ideas, as they arise in the mind, have different objects. Thus, the mind contains now the idea of a post, now the idea of a wall, now the idea of a jar, and so on. Now, this is not possible without some distinction between the ideas themselves, and so we must acknowledge that ideas have the same forms as their objects. But if this is so, then it follows that the forms of objects are determined by ideas, and thus the hypothesis of the existence of external things becomes altogether unnecessary.

**Argument 3.** Knowing (the act of knowledge) and the known (the object of knowledge) always arise in our consciousness simultaneously. It follows that the two are in reality identical. When we are conscious of the one, we are also conscious of the other; and that could not be if the two were essentially different, for then it would be possible to be conscious of the one without being conscious of the other. For this reason also [that knowing and the object known are one and the same] we maintain that there are no external things [because knowing is definitely an internal mental act] . . . .

**Argument 4.** When we dream, or when we are subject to a magical illusion or a mirage, the ideas in our minds appear in the twofold form of subject and object although there is, in fact, no external object present at all. In the same way, ideas of posts, walls, jars, and the like, which occur in waking states, arise [or may arise] independently of external objects. They also are nothing but ideas [in the mind].

**Argument 5.** If there are no external [non-mental] objects, how do we account for the great variety of ideas in the mind? Our answer to this question is that that variety is to be explained from the impressions left by previous ideas. In the beginningless Samsara, ideas and mental impressions succeed each other as causes and effects, just as the plant springs from the seed and seeds are again produced from the plant. Such is the basis of the great variety of ideas we experience.

That the variety of ideas is due solely to impressions left on the mind by past ideas follows, moreover, from the following [considerations]: In dreams, magical illusions, mirages, etc., there arise a variety of ideas from mental impressions without any corresponding external objects; no such variety of ideas could arise from external objects except through mental impressions. Thus, we are again led to conclude that no external things exist.

**Vedanta:** To all this we make the following general reply: We are not persuaded of the non-existence of external things because we are conscious of them. In every act of perception, we are conscious of some external thing corresponding to the idea [of the thing in our mind], whether it be a post or a wall or a piece of cloth or a jar, and that of which we are conscious must exist. Why should we pay any attention to a man who, while conscious of an external thing through his senses, declares that he is conscious of no external thing and that no such thing exists? Should we take him any more seriously than we do a man who, while he is eating and enjoying his food, tells us that he is neither eating nor enjoying himself?

**Yogacara:** We are not saying that we are conscious of no object, but rather that we are conscious of no object apart from the act of consciousness.

**Vedanta:** [Well, you] may make any arbitrary statement you like, but you have no good arguments to prove what you say. That external things exist apart from consciousness must be acknowledged because of the nature of consciousness itself. Nobody, when perceiving a post or a wall, is conscious of his perception only, but everybody is conscious of posts and walls and the like as objects of perception. Even those [the metaphysical idealists] who deny the existence of external things bear witness to their existence when they say that what appears in their minds is "like something external." For all practical

purposes, the idealists follow common sense, which testifies to the existence of an external world; and if they did not themselves, underneath it all, acknowledge the existence of the external world, how could they use the expression "like something external?" No one says, "Vishnumitra appears like the son of a barren mother." If we accept the truth as it is given to us in our consciousness, we must admit that the object of perception appears to us *as* something external, not "like" something external.

**Yogacara:** But we conclude that the object of perception is only *like* something external because the existence of external objects is impossible.

**Vedanta:** This conclusion is unacceptable. The possibility or impossibility of things is to be determined only on the basis of the legitimate means of knowledge; and the legitimate means of knowledge are not to be [restricted by] preconceived possibilities or impossibilities.<sup>1</sup> *Possible* is whatever is apprehended by perception or some other recognized means of proof; *impossible* is what is not so apprehended.

**Response to Yogacara Argument 1:** Now, external things are shown to be not only possible but actual through all the recognized means of knowledge. How, then, can you [the Yogacara idealist] maintain that they are not possible on the basis of such idle dilemmas as that about their difference or non-difference from atoms?

**Response to Yogacara Argument 2:** Furthermore, the non-existence of external objects does not follow from the fact that ideas have the same form as their objects. If there were no external objects, then ideas could not have the forms of their objects. Furthermore, the objects [of consciousness] are actually experienced as external.

**Response to Yogacara Argument 3:** For the same reason (that is, because the distinction between object and idea is given in consciousness), the fact that idea and object are always found together proves only that the object constitutes the occasion of the idea, not that the two are identical. Moreover, when we are conscious first of a pot and then of a piece of cloth, consciousness remains the same in the two acts while what varies are the objects of consciousness. [And then,] with regard to the perception and [later] remembrance of a jar, the [earlier] perception and the [subsequent] remembrance [states of consciousness] are different while the jar [the object] remains one and the same. Therefore, object and idea are [metaphysically] distinct [not one and the same] . . . .

**Response to Yogacara Argument 4:** We now apply ourselves to the refutation of the Yogacara claim that ideas of posts, walls, jars, and so on, of which we are conscious in the waking state, may arise in the absence of external objects as do ideas in our dreams. These two kinds of ideas cannot be treated on the same footing. There are significant differences between them. The things of which we are conscious in a dream are negated by our waking consciousness. "I dreamed that I had a meeting with a great man, but no such meeting actually took place; my mind was dulled by slumber, and so the false idea arose." Similarly, the things of which we are conscious when under the influence of a magical illusion are negated by our ordinary consciousness. However, those things of which we are conscious in our waking states, such as posts, jars, and the like, are never negated in any state of consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, our dream experiences are acts of remembrance,<sup>3</sup> whereas our experiences in the waking state are acts of immediate consciousness, and the distinction between

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<sup>1</sup>Various "means of knowledge" (*pramanas*) are recognized in classical Indian philosophy, namely, perception, inference, verbal testimony (that is, sacred scripture), comparison (analogy), postulation, and "valid non-perception" (perceiving that something is *not* the case). These six *pramanas* are understood as means or sources of knowledge at the level of ordinary experience. At a higher level of experience, there is knowledge of *Brahman*, ultimate reality. This higher knowledge of *Brahman* is arrived at through direct intuition or vision, which is a product of meditation (within the context of the practice of Yoga).

<sup>2</sup>This is a puzzling passage because Shankara's argument here seems inconsistent with his own views. Isn't ordinary waking consciousness (of individual selves and material objects) based on ignorance and illusion? Isn't *Brahman-Atman* alone real, and isn't the world of ordinary waking consciousness merely a misleading *appearance* of Brahman, as when we take a rope to be a snake? Doesn't enlightenment bring a state of consciousness (*Brahman-Atman* consciousness) that negates ordinary waking consciousness?

<sup>3</sup>That is, dream images are drawn from the pool of our remembered waking experiences.

remembrance and immediate consciousness is directly recognized by every one as being founded on the absence or presence of the object [of consciousness]. For example, when a man remembers his absent son, he does not directly perceive him, but merely wishes so to perceive him . . . .

**Response to Yogacara Argument 5:** We now proceed to that theory of yours, according to which the variety of ideas can be explained from the variety of mental impressions, without any reference to external objects. On that theory, the very existence of mental impressions is impossible because, according to your general viewpoint, there can be no perception of external objects. But the variety of mental impressions is caused entirely by the variety of the objects perceived. How could various impressions arise if there is no perception of external objects? You cannot establish your position by means of the hypothesis of a beginningless series of mental impressions, for that leads to a baseless infinite regress that would make the existence of the entire phenomenal world impossible.<sup>1</sup> In our view, the perception of external objects may take place without giving rise to mental impressions, but mental impressions cannot arise without the perception of external objects . . . .

### **Buddhist Voidism (Madhyamaka)**

We have now refuted both the Buddhist Realists, who maintain the (momentary) reality of the external world, and the Buddhist Idealists, who claim that only consciousness exists. The third variety of Buddhist philosophy (Madhyamaka Voidism), that is, the view that everything is empty (that is, that absolutely nothing exists),<sup>2</sup> is contradicted by all the recognized means of knowledge [perception, inference, the verbal testimony of the Scriptures, etc.] and therefore requires no special refutation. The reality of the phenomenal world is guaranteed by all the means of knowledge. Its existence cannot be denied without a convincing proof of its non-existence (or "emptiness"), for a conclusion arrived at on the basis of the standard means of knowledge must be accepted in the absence of a convincing argument to the contrary.

### **General assessment of Buddhist philosophy**

No further special discussion is required. From whatever points of view the Buddhist systems are tested with regard to their plausibility, they cave in on all sides, like the walls of a well dug in sandy soil. [Buddhist philosophy] has, in fact, no foundation whatever to rest upon, and thus it is foolish to adopt it as a guide in the practical concerns of life. Moreover, the Buddha,<sup>3</sup> by presenting three mutually contradictory systems of philosophy — teaching respectively the reality of the external world, the reality of consciousness-only, and general emptiness — has himself made it clear either that he was a man given to making incoherent assertions, or else that hatred of all beings moved him to propound absurd doctrines that would thoroughly confuse all who might take him seriously. Thus, the Buddha's doctrine must be entirely disregarded by all those who have a regard for their own happiness.

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<sup>1</sup>If there is a beginningless (infinitely long) series of mental impressions that succeed each other as causes and effects, and if this infinitely long series is supposed to produce a variety of mental impressions in my mind, then there will never be any mental impressions in my mind. Before I can have any mental impressions, the prior mental impressions that cause my mental impressions must exist, but before those prior mental impressions can exist, the even earlier mental impressions that cause those prior mental impressions must exist, and so on to infinity. Since it is impossible for an infinitely long causal series to reach completion, no mental impressions can arise in my mind; and since (according to Yogacara idealism) the phenomenal world (the world that appears to me) is a product of my mental impressions, there can therefore be no phenomenal world.

<sup>2</sup>Is Shankara's characterization of Madhyamaka Voidism correct? Doesn't Nagarjuna, in *The Fundamentals of the Middle Way* (above), distinguish between his own view that all things are empty (of essence) and the (nihilistic) view that nothing exists?

<sup>3</sup>In the following sentences, Shankara is assuming that the Buddha himself (560-483 BC) was the originator of the philosophies of Buddhist Realism, Idealism, and Voidism. Most scholars believe that these philosophical systems emerged in the centuries following the death of the Buddha.