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**THE CONCEPT OF “BRAHMAN” IN VEDĀNTA PHILOSOPHY: A
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF
ŚAṆKARĀCĀRYA’S AND VIVEKANANDA’S THEOLOGICAL
APPROACHES**

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Introduction:

Śaṅkarācārya declares his doctrine as Advaita or non-duality. For him, Brahman or the Ultimate Reality is the Self itself. Sometimes it is called “Brahman” from the cosmic standpoint and it has been called “Atman” from the point of view of individual nature. Of course, „Atman“ and “Brahman” have the same characteristics of being consciousness, all-pervading and bliss. Atman is Brahman which is beyond the subject object duality.

In Śaṅkarācārya’s philosophy of religion, Brahman or Atman is the Ultimate Reality. On the other hand, Vivekananda puts that Brahman is Infinite Existence (Sat), Infinite Knowledge (Cit), and Infinite Bliss (Ānanda). In accordance with him, Brahman possesses no name or form. He is not within space, time and causation, i.e., Brahman is beyond these physical factors. Vivekananda kept belief in two ideas of God—personal and impersonal. The former God has been explained as having the qualities of Omnipotence, Omniscience, Creator, Preserver and destroyer of this world of everything, but, of course, God is not being separated from that of Atman. On the other hand, the Impersonal God possessing none of these qualities or attributes. Śaṅkarācārya regarded personal God or *fiṣvara* as determinate (*saguṇa*), God, according to him, is the product of ignorance and *Māyā*. He is not real from the transcendental point of view. In contrast to this position, Vivekananda says that Absolute and God are not two. God is not the creation of *Māyā*, God is all-pervasive, omniscient and omnipotent.

Śaṅkarācārya affirms that the Brahman is the Absolute or the Ultimate Reality or the intimate Self. Atman-Brahman is one without a second. The multiplicity or duality of this universe is experienced by us, not as many but as one Brahman, the Absolute. All this is Brahman, “*sarvam khalvidam Brahma*”, puts the Upaniṣads. The very being of Brahman has been proved as the Self of all beings. The existence of the Self (Atman), which is Self-existent and self-proved, proves the existence of Brahman. The Atman is the foundational consciousness. It is the transcendental basis

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

of the empirical world. The Atman is Brahman. It is one, eternal universal consciousness which is the only ontological reality. Taittiriya Upaniṣad says : “*satyam jnanam anantam Brahman*”(Tait. Up.(2.1.1). Brahman is the Truth, the Knowledge, the Infinite. Each and everyone needs to receive vision of it as it is all-pervading and the door is open to all to realize it. In the philosophy of Śāṅkarācārya, Brahman has been explained to be existence, knowledge and bliss. He is infinite, eternal, supreme knowledge supreme bliss. Existence is knowledge; knowledge is existence, and both cannot be separated from one another. Being is consciousness. Consciousness is being. Brahman is infinite, immortal and imperishable. It is not limited by time, space and objects. It is eternally fulfilled and bliss of the nature of bliss. Existence, knowledge and bliss are its essential characters. These characters distinguish Brahman from the world which is unreal.¹

Brahman is non-spatial, non-temporal, non-causal and trans-empirical existence. It transcends the past, the present and the future, and causes and effects, which are empirical phenomena. It transcends all empirical existence. It is free from all differences of space, time, substance, attribute, action and the like. Brahman is one, attribute less and indeterminate real being. Though Brahman is devoid of phenomenal qualities, it appears to be possessed of attributes. Brahman is devoid of a genus, quality, activity and other determinations. The higher Brahman (*parabrahma*) is devoid of phenomenal attributes and determinations. It is the supreme reality. For Śāṅkarācārya, the self is both known and unknown and the “I” must be separated from the not “I” which refers to the entirety of knowledge and the senses, in addition to the physical body and all of its organs. The Real is best understood as a thing with traits that lives in the world and in the human self, because ordinary people find it difficult to grasp the Real as existing outside of space and time. For the higher knowledge, this knowledge is meant to act as a prerequisite. The self satisfies every craving there is. All of a person's urges and aspirations can be satisfied in their heart, which is where Brahman resides.

One enters into the Brahman of the heart when one remains in deep sleep. One is to realize the self in one's heart: *Hridaya-nama-nirvachana prasiddhyapi sva hridayeamety evagantavyam*”. “The main idea of the Advaita (non-dualistic) Vedānta philosophy as taught by the Śāṅkarācārya school in this, that the ultimate and absolute truth is the self, which is one, though appearing as many different individuals”. From the above discussion, it follows that Śāṅkarācārya, the famous Advaita Vedāntist, kept belief in the Ultimate Reality or Brahman as one indivisible reality called Brahman. The individual soul or Atman can never be separated from the absolute

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

Brahman. The Advaita admits the very oneness between the individual soul or Atman and the supreme Reality or Brahman. Those who are committing variety in respect of the reality suffer a cosmic blunder. According to Vivekananda, Brahman is “Sat”, “Cit” and “Ananda”. He says that Brahman is not within space, time and causation, i.e., Brahman is beyond these physical factors.

To Vivekananda, Absolute and God are not two. God is not the creation of Māyā, God is all pervasive, omnipresent and omniscient. Again, Vivekananda puts that the Absolute possesses being and becoming. The Absolute has become the universe through space, time and causation. Time, space and causation are like ways of reaching Absolute and when reached on the lower stage, it is the universe. We get neither time, space nor causation in the Absolute as the Absolute is beyond them all. These factors possess no real existence though they cannot be said to be non-existence since all things of the world are getting manifestation through them alone as the universe. They now and then disappear. When mangoes through time, space and causation, the Absolute is detected manifesting as many. In this way, it follows that Vivekananda had two different conceptions of Brahman or Absolute as apparently revealed in the universe and is really expressed in it.² Though like Śaṅkarācārya, Vivekananda admits the Brahman as the sole Reality and the world is unreal in the generic sense, still he made an introduction of a policy of giving and taking.

In similar voice with Śaṅkarācārya, Vivekananda rejects the reality of the world though he, in contrast to Śaṅkarācārya, deifies the world. Śaṅkarācārya rejected the world as unreal but Vivekananda did not do so, rather he assigns a status of Brahman itself to the world. Vivekananda supplements and transforms the famous assertion of Śaṅkarācārya “All this is nothing” into “All this is nothing but Brahman”. He in other way transforms and extends the concept of Brahman. Śaṅkarācārya was pre-eminently a spiritualist, who kept belief in soul or in an Impersonal God or Brahman. He enunciated his doctrine of the phenomenal world in line with the revelation of the great Rishis, of the Upaniṣads and, seers of the Vedas. Śaṅkarācārya no doubt emphasized on the ultimate Reality who is Brahman. But the mundane world of existence was not repudiated by him from the *vyvahārika* or practical approach. He, of course, ascribed relative value to the material world of reality. Its importance has been highlighted in redefining the individual soul.³

Vivekananda agrees with Śaṅkarācārya regarding his concept of Reality or Absolute or God. Reality, for Vivekananda, is one absolute Brahman. This Brahman is the only all-

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

pervading, immanent Reality. It can be said to be a perfect unity. The Absolute is an indivisible, immutable, comprehensive whole. The Absolute cannot be divided. It does not admit of even internal division. The Absolute is beyond space, time and causation. The Absolute is seen through time, space and causation. But these categories are not a part of the Absolute.⁴

The Absolute, according to Vivekananda, is indefinable and so it is unknowable. Man can know only that, what is limited by human minds. The Absolute cannot be limited by the mind. Otherwise, it will be no more Absolute. It is not the finite. It is a contradiction in terms to know the Reality or the Absolute. This Absolute is not determined by anything else. It is self-existent. The Absolute is Infinite Existence, Infinite Consciousness and Infinite Bliss (Sat-Cit-Ānanda). He is impersonal, indeterminate, formless and one without a second. In the philosophy of Vivekananda, the concepts of God and Absolute cannot be said to be two distinct concepts. God, the Absolute substance or the cosmic intelligence, permeates the whole world. The impersonal Brahman has been regarded as the Creator, the Ruler and the destroyer of the universe in its cosmic aspect. In such a way, a belief in personal God arises along with the impersonal nature of the Absolute. Personal God is a phase of the Impersonal. To keep faith in an Impersonal God is a philosophical task. At the same time, personal God is essential to fulfill the demands of the religious and the spiritual expectations of human being. The difference between personal God and the impersonal God does not, in any way, affect the nature of God. God remains as He is. In accordance with Vivekananda, God is the essential unity of everything of the world. For him, the concept of God is necessary. It is the Truth. It is freedom. God is explained as the one eternal principle. Human beings ascribe qualities to God all the best they know. Therefore, Vivekananda puts that God is a human God. God is merely infinitely greater than man. We must adore God in human beings so long as we are human. We must transcend our human nature to learn God what He is.⁵

The highest objective of man is God Himself. In similar way with Śaṅkarācārya, Vivekananda also says that the Absolute Reality can be explained as Sat-Cit-Ānanda. The concepts of Sat (existence) and Cit (consciousness) possess similarity with the Sat and the Cit of Advaita Vedānta, but the notion of Ānanda (Bliss) is highly enriched by Vivekananda. Being partially influenced by Buddhism and Christianity, Vivekananda makes “love” the essential core

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

of “bliss”. He puts that Ānanda is in love. The reference of “love” made by Vivekananda takes us to the consideration of the other aspects of his philosophy of God—to its monotheistic aspect.

According to Vivekananda, the mind views the Absolute, the impersonal Brahman, as the one and only Cause of the cosmos, as well as its Creator, Ruler, and Destroyer. As someone who never stops caring about his creation, he has also been characterized as completely kind and good. A belief in a personal God coexists with this understanding of the Absolute's impersonal character. Actually, according to Vivekananda, a personal God is the only one capable of satisfying man's religious sentiments and ambitions.⁶

In Śaṅkarācārya's Advaita Vedānta also, the concept of God has been given a place, but there God has been accepted as a product of ignorance of “Māyā” and as such, is not real from the real point of view—the *Pāramārthika drsti*. But Vivekananda asserts that Absolute and God are not two—that God is not a creation of “Māyā”. These differences happen because we don't know enough or because our understanding is limited, but knowing something means realizing that the difference doesn't matter. From a philosophical point of view, reality is pure Brahman. From a religious point of view, God is such Brahman. To say it again, the most real thing is also what we worship and are devoted to. Because of this, Vivekananda stresses that God is everywhere. God knows everything and is everywhere.

“Through His control the sky expands, through His control the air breathes, through His control the sun shines, and through His control all live. He is the Reality in nature, He is the Soul of your soul, nay, more, you are He, you are one with Him”.⁷

The concepts of reality and God are not distinct in Vivekananda's philosophy. He combines Abstract Monism and Theism in his thought. From this standpoint, Vivekananda is a pantheist, and yet God, in accordance with him, is personal. Hence we find two currents flowing almost side by side in the philosophy of Vivekananda—one that resembles Advaita Vedānta, and the other that reminds one of the theism of the Bhakti-cult. Therefore, Vivekananda puts that these two currents are not really two currents; these are just two ways of looking at the Reality. But then, an attempt can be made to determine the features of both these aspects of his thought. Vivekananda, as an Advaitin, declares that reality is one absolute Brahman. He emphasized the monistic character of reality to such a great extent that he asserts that reality is one but not

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

“whole”. The idea of a “whole” indicates the parts, which, when organized, give the whole. Vivekananda comments, since Absolute is perfect unity, and so the difference between whole and parts totally disappears.⁸

The concept of Absolute is arrived at by carrying the process of abstraction to its maximum possible limit, and that explains its strictly monistic character. Vivekananda heartily emphasized the very necessity of God concept. This necessity is completely reasonable to him for the simple reason that an apparent rejection of God’s existence is simply impossible. In his view, it is impossible to retain the reality of the world and the soul without accepting the reality of God. In accordance with Vivekananda, God has to be presupposed as the necessary support and ground of both the world and the soul. He, being impressed by Śaṅkarācārya, comments that the world reveals an essential unity of everything. One has merely to think over to find in a well order that things that look so very different from each other are really and basically one and the same.⁹ This is a fact that the reality is one. From the above analysis, it is clearly reflected that Vivekananda conceived of God more or less in the manner of Advaita Vedānta—but with a difference. This difference follows from the act that Vivekananda is not prepared to admit that theistic descriptions of God are descriptions of God from a lower point of view; as a matter of fact, he feels that the Vedāntic distinction between Absolute and God is an additional one.

To Vivekananda, God is the essential unity of everything, and in this way, omnipresent. Hence, there is no necessity for making differences of any kind; everyone is free to perceive Him in whatever way he likes. God is explained as one eternal principle. This may lead one to suppose that God is the unchanging and abiding principle in the midst of change, but that is not the exact notion of eternity. God is eternal since time and change are not relevant to it. Vivekananda has conceived God as supreme Goodness that does not indicate only moral perfection. The question of morality is also not relevant to God. There is no difference between good and evil. Vivekananda says that divine goodness possesses two sides: First, it means that God is bliss and happiness. Secondly, it indicates that it is possible for every individual to be good if he fixes up the supreme Goodness as his ideal and inspiration. Such type of assertion reminds us another character of God to which Vivekananda has given a unique importance. In accordance with Vivekananda, God is a human God. This affirmation apart from being anthropomorphic represents a very great truth. This implies that man learns that the spark of

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

Divinity is within himself. Vivekananda is very conscious regarding the fact that one of the greatest justifications of God concept is the fact that God is capable of satisfying our urges and requirements, and is able to provide to our life greater validity and strength. That is why some human qualities have been attributed to God for establishing inter-communication. Vivekananda, therefore, puts that God is merciful, just, omnipotent and almighty. We can approach, pray, love Him in return, and so forth. Simply speaking, God is a human God, merely infinitely greater than human.¹⁰

Vivekananda is making attempt to bring religion within the easy reach of the common people, and he well realizes that the common man is more interested in personal than that of the impersonal character of God. According to him, man cannot explain God with the help of language. Because, all linguistic endeavors, naming Him father, or brother, our dearest friend, are only endeavors to objectify God, which is not possible. God, Vivekananda comments, is the eternal subject of all. Conclusion: It has been reflected from the above discussion that some of the basic ideas of the philosophy of Vivekananda are derived from the Vedānta. It can be mentioned to a very great extent, he is a Vedāntist. Though all the Brahmanical systems are derived from the Upaniṣad, there is justification to hold that merely the Advaita Vedānta reflects the true heart of the Upaniṣads. Śaṅkarācārya explains that the world is ultimately an illusion. The world appears to us real due to ignorance. But from the standpoint of infinity, it is not so. The whole system of Advaita Vedānta can be summarized in a half verse—“*Brahma satyam, jagat mithya, jivo brahmaiva naparah*”¹¹. That is to say that Brahman is the only Reality, the world is ultimately false and the individual soul is non-different from Brahman. Brahman and Atman are synonymous terms. The individual selves, owing to their inherent ignorance, imagine themselves as different from Brahman. Truly speaking, Vivekananda being influenced by Śaṅkarācārya has developed Advaita Vedānta as a true source of philosophical as well as spiritual thinking of life. It is to be noted that both the Advaita Vedānta and the Madhymika system developed as criticism of the Sāṃkhya and the Abhidharmika system respectively. The idealist Vedānta represents monism by criticizing Sāṃkhya dualism. Goudapada and his competent successor Śaṅkarācārya revolutionized the Vedānta, by introducing the theory of appearance—Vivarta Vāda. They turned down the earlier notion of the Sāṃkhya of a real transformation of the absolute into phenomena—Parinamavāda and asserted non-dualism as the true teaching of the Upaniṣad.¹²

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

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