

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

I ask as a fool who knows not his own spirit:
Where are the hidden traces left by the Gods?
RgVeda 1, 164, 5

THE WORLD¹ OF ADVAITA VEDĀNTA

Again and again one hears Advaita proclaim the necessity, and greatness, of “enquiry” (*viveka*). In order to begin to have an insight into the Indian philosophical system known as Advaita Vedānta, it appears one must question one’s most cherished presuppositions, that is: Was I born? Am I my physical body? Am I my thoughts? Am I really so and so? How do I know that I exist? Who were my parents? Have they created me or have I created them? Who am I?

How does one know that one is reading a book right now? This is not a rhetorical question. (We all learned such knowledge at our mother’s knee.) We can see the book, smell it, touch it, taste it, even hear it (if we drop the book). Everyone believes that this is something we can “take to the bank.” It is sure and certain. The five senses are our bedrock touchstones. And of the five, sight is primary. For, don’t we often say, “oh, I see!,” to convey correct understanding, comprehension.

However, suppose one were to go outside and *watch* the sun traverse the sky on a clear day. What is wrong with this picture? We all know that the sun *does not* move. Yet we *see* it. Suppose one were to stand on a railroad track and peer

down the tracks. What would one see? The tracks *appear* to come together at some distant point. Yet we all know that one could walk forever down those tracks and they would *never* merge together. Suppose one were to hold a stick under water. We would see that the stick is bent. Yet we all know that the stick is not really bent. These examples could be multiplied on end. The point is, our senses (or, more accurately, our mental interpretations) have betrayed us. And what can betray us in one instance, may do so in another. Is there any water in a mirage? Will there ever be any water in a mirage? And yet, inexplicably, wonderously, we perceive this “non-existent water.” A non-existent dream-lion chases one in a dream and, as the lion plunges at one’s throat, the dreamer awakens with a jolt to discover a beating heart and sweat on the forehead. A seemingly non-existent, illusory entity producing real results. How strange!

Because one believes in oneself, the thinker, the seer, the hearer, and so forth, one has faith that what one thinks, sees, and hears is (take it to the bank) “REAL.” Instead, why not doubt the things which come and go, for example, thoughts, sights, sounds, and hold onto that which is always there and is foundational to it all—yourself.² The “I AM” can never be changed into “I AM NOT.” What is experienced is always open to doubt. The *meaning* of what is experienced can always be doubted. But, that *someone* experienced is certain.

Language may be very misleading. One may assume, perhaps unconsciously, that reality is approachable through knowledge (*vidyā*), through thoughts, through information. Then, logically, one quite naturally assumes that there must also exist a knower of reality beyond the knowledge, beyond the thoughts, beyond the information known. But, the question may be asked, can Reality be known? Knowledge, as well as ignorance, may be of the mind only. Let us investigate.

To enquire into the purport of Advaita Vedānta is to enquire into an insight in search of What-Is. It is to quest after what is Real, what is Ultimate, what is of lasting value, certainty. In this day and age, every Western television-

movie viewer knows that the “final frontier” is space. But space is not the *final* frontier. The final frontier carries with it an odor of finality, of completeness, of certainty. No matter how far one travels outwardly, Advaita avers that the final frontier will always be within. One may always doubt whatever one encounters as an “other.” One could travel to heaven and look over to the throne of God and wonder whether that “entity” over there is really God or not. One may always doubt the “other.” We are smart enough, sophisticated enough, to know about dreams and hallucinations and visions and illusions and relative perspectives. Think about it—all one may be certain of right now is that one is present. This book may not be real, the act of reading may not be real, but that *you* are present is indubitable.

Is there something certain, something that one may *never* doubt. Advaita avers one can never doubt one’s own Self, the doubter him or herself. No matter where one finds oneself, oneself is *always* there. Why, the very act of doubting oneself is but an affirmation of oneself, for, one can always ask, “who exactly is doing the doubting?” To say that “I do not exist” is to affirm the “I” who is doing the doubting.

Who is this “I”? That is the essence of Advaita and, according to Advaita, the essence of all language—religious or otherwise. But I am getting ahead of myself.

THE PROBLEM

Ordinary language is quite messy, very problematic.³ Why is there a special problem concerning specifically religious discourse? Religious discourse attempts to point to, analyze, describe, guide one to the “promised land.” This renders religious discourse full of paradoxes and contradictions. For instance, traditional statements claim that God is incorporeal or, that God is a spirit. Thus, what does it mean to say: “The arm of the Lord is sure, the eye of the Lord is steadfast; God is a jealous and angry God”? How can one say that God is physically indescribable without indicating somehow *what it is*

that is being said to be indescribable? It would appear that religious assertions are not genuine assertions at all but a kind of “double-think.”

In both Eastern and Western philosophies/religions, the status of religious discourse has been critiqued in various ways. Distinctions can be discerned and described along lines of description, meaning, interpretation, apprehension, expression, convention, and contrasting perspectives. The sum result of this scholarship is that the very possibility of a philosophical understanding of religious discourse has been called into question.⁴ The purpose of this book is an attempt to show that, because of its *radically* unique metaphysical standpoint,⁵ Advaita Vedānta’s use and understanding of religious statements is not subject to these common criticisms which are leveled against other systems. Advaita, it is true, may be subject to *other* criticisms. It is my claim that incoherence and self-contradiction is not one of them.

The aim of this book is to examine the main concepts, and especially the purport, of the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta vis-à-vis religious knowledge. It goes without saying that this unavoidably requires a certain arbitrariness. This is not to say that the historical development of Advaita is unimportant. It is not to say that I will focus on one particular individual Advaita exponent or try to give an overall historical development of the school. This is for two reasons. First and foremost, I am trying to present an insight into “how” the philosophical idea known as “advaita” would encompass the problem of religious knowledge. Second, the problem of the historical analysis of Advaita is not as straightforward and simple as might seem at first sight.

In recent times, there have been numerous attempts to interpret the history of Advaita Vedānta, especially the thought of Śaṅkara. T. M. P. Mahadevan posits that Advaitins knew of Buddhist thought and any similarities in presentation, vocabulary, or doctrine were simply tactical devices for overcoming their opponents. Some attempted to divide Śaṅkara’s work into several stages, that is, pre, early, middle, and late.⁶ Others believed that Śaṅkara’s thought coincides

with Buddhism, especially Mahāyāna Buddhism.⁷ And still others⁸ propose that the differences between early Advaitins and Buddhists were “largely a matter of emphasis and background rather than one of real essence.”⁹

Some scholars may aver that Advaita Vedānta is not a single, uniform system of thought. I am well aware of the fact that Advaita is usually divided into pre-Śaṅkara, Śaṅkara, and post-Śaṅkara positions as well as the fact that Advaita has two major “ways” (*prasthāna*) or “school”: The *Bhāmātī-prasthāna* and the *Vivaraṇa-prasthāna*, with their many adherents presenting subtle and not so subtle differences in doctrine. As well, there are post-Śaṅkara Advaitins who do not fit neatly into either school.

However, it must be stressed that these differences are only *exegetical* and not doctrinal. These differences have arisen in the course of the elucidation of a particular point of view, in the clarification of an issue, in the answering of an objection and so on. All such differences take place only within the framework of Advaita Vedānta. Every perspective, every mode of interpretation, which are each no doubt significant and insightful, are relative and are intended only to help one realize the *inward Self*.¹⁰ Such differences are not irreconcilable within the framework of Advaita nor do they make Pre-Śaṅkara Advaita, Śaṅkara’s Advaita, and post-Śaṅkara Advaita a house divided against itself.

It is precisely because of the central theme of Advaita, that is, the identity of *ātman* and *Brahman*, that the two separate though related problems regarding the meaningfulness of religious knowledge are resolved. The first dilemma: does language function differently when it is used to make religious statements and, second, how is one to distinguish true from false religious statements?

It is an acknowledged fact, even by the Western proponents who advocated their various solutions,¹¹ that the existent proposed solutions to the problem(s) inherent in religious discourse are full of self-contradictions—even *if* one is to grant their presuppositions. This is a crucial point—even *if* one is to grant their presuppositions. It is my claim that if one

is to grant Advaita's presuppositions, then what follows is logically consistent and coherent.¹²

TWO ASSERTIONS

It is true that this work includes a short review of the basic epistemological and metaphysical positions propounded by Advaita Vedānta. However, the purpose behind presenting these viewpoints is to provide a background against, and out of which, a radical Advaitic theory of religious discourse will emerge. More than an apologetic, this work is intended to state two radically new assertions in regards to theories of religious discourse.¹³

These two assertions are:

1. Religious discourse can be interpreted to be not only cognitive, but also valid.

This in itself is not a unique claim, but it becomes so when Advaita adds to it that since the referent of religious discourse is immediately present as the constitutive being of everything whatsoever, and therefore self-evident and certain, it is fundamental and prior to all proofs which must necessarily presuppose it. Yet it does not presuppose itself as it is the one indubitable fact of experience, which can never be denied without self-contradiction. Advaita's vision claims that for the qualified aspirant, religious discourse directly and cognitively asserts the Reality and that for the non-qualified aspirant, religious discourse indirectly, or, in specific cases, directly asserts the Absolute. And . . .

2. Contrary to common belief, it is more philosophically and logically consistent to speak of the unqualified Absolute than of a theistic deity.¹⁴

The general idea is that an anthropomorphic God is comprehensible but inappropriate as an object of worship and that a non-anthropomorphic God is utterly incomprehensible. An attempt is made to ground the incomprehensible Absolute within each one's own personal experience thus making it more than a mere assertion or theoretical concept and establishing it as an indubitable fact of experience.

RELIGION AND LANGUAGE

It is remarkable that one is able to make a meaningful statement about an entity who or which is alleged, by the very person making the statement, to be transcendent to the finite world and radically different from it. Thus, it is that religious discourse raises an interesting and intriguing problem. Its subject matter involves a reality which is trans-human. The problem is to explain how ordinary day-to-day language, which exists and lives in and for the world of individuals and objects, may be used meaningfully to refer to this trans-human reality. What does it mean to say that all of existence has a Divine Ground or that God's love is like a father's love? The word "ground" ordinarily refers to the earth beneath one's feet, the word "father" ordinarily refers to one's progenitor, and the word "love" ordinarily refers to a human emotion. When someone asserts that God is Three in One, are they intending to assert such a paradox? Are the above statements at all meaningful, and if so, how and why?

That religious language has a problem has been variously acknowledged by many Western proponents. Anthony Flew merely continued an ancient insight when he suggested that religious statements are not genuine assertions at all. Immanuel Kant noted that many concepts work perfectly well when dealing with a matter of sense-experience but which break down when applied to transcendent realities.

Briefly, we may say that there are two main problems to be resolved regarding religious discourse. First, does language function differently when it is used to make statements about God? Second, how is one to distinguish false statements about God from true ones? Everyone acknowledges that the same language is being used. It is the only language we have. Some, however, believe that ordinary language is not being used in the *same* or ordinary way when one speaks religiously.

This book is an attempt to solve such problems inherent in religious discourse. These problems have existed within philosophy for thousands of years and even to this day there is no

one definitive solution. A plethora of literature has grown around this problem giving rise to claims and counterclaims. It is my contention that Advaita Vedānta gives an intriguing insight into understanding religious discourse, or “God-talk” as it has sometimes been called in the Western world. The interpretation that I am proposing, at the very least, does not involve internal contradictions and inconsistencies. Any position is open to attack from “outside.” My argument concerns whether a given position is “internally” consistent or not.

Nor do I feel it necessary to describe every possible historical solution. This is important. My intention in stating other proposed solutions is only to give an understanding of, an insight into the problems which all “other” solutions involve. The crux of the issue is, as long as duality is given real ontological value, the problem of religious discourse can never be logically solved. One may take this as my accepted axiom for which absolutely no exception may be made. It is a fact of logical thought and as long as consistent and coherent thought is one’s guide, it must be acknowledged and adhered to.

It appears obvious to me that: either there exists a “gap” between the individual and the Divine or there does not. Unless the individual is fully and totally Divine, some sort of gap must exist and with it comes the necessity of crossing that gap. If such a gap exists, then the Divine is an “Other,” of one sort or another. This raises the philosophical and existential question of “how does one know an ‘other,’” and “is this knowledge veridical or not?”

According to Advaita, the Self, who one truly is, is the proof of everything, including oneself. No “other” can ever be the proof of one’s existence because that “other’s” existence must be confirmed by you first. One’s own being, and knowing, is owed to none outside oneself. It is by imagining others as others that a gap is created. Such a gap need not be bridged or crossed if it does not exist (except in one’s imagination). Just don’t create it. We have all experienced that the mind can create illusions and the mind can destroy illusions.

Individuals search for proofs for the Truth, proofs for the Self. Advaita claims that asking for such proofs is like a child

that demands: "Prove to me that sugar is sweet and only then will I have some." How can a proof of the Truth precede Truth? And will there then be a demand for a proof of the proof?

Advaita avers that philosophical proofs are the work of discursive reason. Yet, for the Advaitin, the Absolute eludes the grasp of discursive reason, of mental concepts. How could the existence and nature of the Self, of *Brahman*, of the Truth be "proved" without turning them into objects? However, an objectified *Brahman/Self/Truth* is a (seeming) appearance of the Absolute and not the Absolute itself.

Where is the dwelling place of Truth/*Brahman*/the Self? Where could one possibly go in search of such a one? And how will one know when one has found it? What is the touchstone which one brings to test it? Religious language, according to Advaita, points to the truth that Truth is not the result of an effort. It is here and now. It is not seen because one seeks for it far away from oneself.

Advaita begins with an enquiry into what is real and what is not real—*nityānityavastuviveka*. Which individual ever questions their cherished belief that they are their physical body, which is obviously born and dies? While alive, externals attract attention and fascinate so completely that rarely does one enquire within. Some Advaitins have compared this to seeing the surface of the ocean and completely forgetting the immensity beneath. Or, like watching the pictures upon a movie screen and ignoring the screen which is permanent and without which the pictures would not appear.

One may identify with the pictures on a movie screen, but it is enough to shift one's attention from the screen to oneself and the spell is broken. While watching a movie, one may identify with the characters on the screen and suffer and rejoice with them. But a simple shifting of one's focus from the screen back to oneself is enough to break the spell. Likewise, one may shift one's attention from the body to an enquiry into one's own Self. Advaita avers that it is due to ignorance that one looks for bliss, for peace, for the Self, in the world of opposites and contradictions. Look within, the "kingdom of heaven" is within.

To posit that the kingdom of heaven is within or that the Self is within is not unique to Advaita. What distinguishes Advaita's vision from other positions is when Advaita asserts that the Self (*ātman*) is not different from the Absolute (*Brahman*). This is the peculiar claim of Advaita and the means whereby it is able to bridge the seeming gap between subject and object, between *That* inscrutable, immutable, seemingly distant Absolute and *this* fallible, mortal, intimately present individual, between God and the human being, between all dualities.