

Jnana, Bhakti, and Karma Yoga.

Sankara and Ramanuja on the Bhagavad-Gita

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Sankara (8th century)¹ is the most famous representative of the *Advaita Vedanta*, which claims that *Brahman* is the only reality, that the empirical world is an illusory appearance, and that the individual soul *atman* is *Brahman*. There is no plurality of ultimate selves, and liberation –the union of the individual *atman* with *Brahman*– can happen in this life. He is sure that the individual’s consciousness can be liberated by realizing its identity in the limitless consciousness that is *Brahman*. The presumption of the identity of the individual soul (*atman*) with the ultimate reality (*Brahman*) can characterize his interpretation as anthropocentric; in fact, it could be said that Sankara divinizes the human.

For Sankara, the ultimate reality is unqualified consciousness and refers to a pure subject that can never become an object. He professes an absolute monism according to which Reality is nothing but *Brahman*, the One, with all multiplicity and diversity being an illusory appearance conditioned by time, space, and causation for which action (*karma*) is its characteristic. *Brahman* is the uncaused causal substance; it is eternal, omnipresent, within everything.

To a question, like the one Arvid Sharma raises, “How is such a concept of a sole reality to be reconciled with the multiplicity in the world as experienced by us” (Arvind Sharma, p. 90), Sankara uses the doctrine of *maya* to explain this plurality which is only an appearance, an illusion that the enlightened one recognizes as such: “Belonging to the Self, as it were, of the omniscient Lord, there are name and form, the figments of Nescience (*avidya*), not to be defined either as being (i.e. *Brahman*), nor as different from it, the germs of the entire expanse of the phenomenal world, called ... the illusion (*maya*), power (*shakti*), or nature (*prakrti*) of the omniscient Lord. Different from them is the omniscient

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1. According to the scholar Arvind Sharma, Sankara’s commentary on the Bhagavad-Gita, perhaps the greatest religious document of Hinduism, is the oldest one.

Lord himself” (*The Vendanta Sutras of Badarayana*, Commentary 2.1.14, p. 328-29). Neither does Brahman undergo any real change; change is only an epiphenomenon.

Consequently, the involved in the human affairs *Brahman* is not fully real. To the question, if, in an absolute monism, ignorance (*avidya*) is a projection of *Brahman* itself, Sankara gives a very ambiguous answer. When true knowledge springs up, perception and the like are no longer valid. When this happens, the Vedas themselves are no longer valid: “In this state a father is no father, a mother no mother, the worlds no worlds, the Vedas no Vedas” (*The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, Commentary 4.3.22, p. 665). Later, though, he adds that, if one accepts the truth that *Brahman* is the cause of the world, *Brahman* must be “all-knowing, all-powerful, and possessing the great power of *Maya*” (*The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, Commentary 2.1.14.37, p. 329 and 362). Although, then, *Brahman* is impersonal, pure Existence, Consciousness, Bliss, Being, God is personal but not the Absolute, yet neither separate from it; he is the Absolute facing the world and knowing it as his object: *Brahman* creates out of itself the world of souls and matter, and faces it. As facing it, it distinguishes itself from the world and becomes God. This implies that, at the level of the Absolute there is no distinction between subject and object, but at the level of God, there is such a distinction. *Brahman* as God is called *Ishvara*.

According to the *Advaita Vedanta*, the world is considered apart from *Brahman*; it is non-existent, *maya*, illusory appearance. The world is neither Being nor Non-being, nor both, nor neither. Every part is an illusory small, separate manifestation of reality as an unqualified whole. It has no existence on its own, but it is an indirect product of *Brahman*. Only *Brahman* is real, *Brahman* alone exists. All the rest, all that appears, is a distortion of the only truth of *Brahman*. The one who sees manifoldness in the world is the one who is still bound in transmigration.

It follows that all empirical experience is relative. Yet, humans, so long as they are products of *maya* and have a relative reality, treat the world as real. To illustrate the fact that real effects can result from illusory causes, Sankara applies an example of the everyday life that of the rope that is mistaken for a snake. The reason for this deception is that humans are ignorant of what reality is, that is, the real nature of things, *Brahman*. Ignorance both conceals and distorts reality. Yet, in an absolute monism, *maya* is not a distinct entity in *Brahman*, but indistinguishable and inseparable from it.

Sankara is a non-dualist who holds that there is no ultimate difference between *Atman* and *Brahman*. The individual self, the inmost essence of humans, is identical with Reality, the ground of the world. The individual soul that is transcendently changeless and not subject to transformation, differs from the highest self in name only; there exists no distinction whatsoever. The *Atman* is not the same as the *jiva*, the ethical souls that have a personality, the part that transmigrates – in fact, the existence of the *jiva* is due to *Atman*. The *Atman* is not the same as the ‘I’-consciousness, and it does not experience pain or pleasure. Nor is it the knower, nor the agent of actions. But if the divine exists also within, then why do people experience pain, desire, volition, doubt, physical needs, impressions of forms etc.? The answer Sankara gives is that there is a false discrimination between the body and the self: the body, which is related to the heart and the intellect, is the locus of all the above, while pain is not real.

Sankara claims that the aim of this life is to realize one’s true nature and attain *moksa*, liberation. This can be realized through knowledge, the philosophical way of *jnana* yoga. Devotion to a personal God (*bhakti* yoga) and religious acts such as sacrifices, pilgrimages, offerings, practice of charity, studying the scriptures etc. (*karma* yoga) are irrelevant ways, and they even tie more to the body. He drew a sharp distinction between *Karmakanda*, the portion of the Veda that is concerned with action in the world, and *Jnanakanda*, whose aim is *moksa* (enlightenment). *Jnanakanda* teaches about the ultimate nature of being and how it can be realized. According to it, the cause of ignorance is nescience, that is, the superimposition of the qualities of one thing upon another, something that can be removed by knowledge (*jnana*). It is wrong to superimpose the subject or the subject’s attributes onto the object and mistake the subject for the object or the subject’s attributes for those of the object. The body and the *Atman* should not be superimposed upon each other through nescience, because the Highest *Atman* is not connected with the body, but different from it and eternal². The result of the means of knowledge is called apprehension.

On his commentary on the *Gita*, Sankara asserts the superiority of *jnana*, the way of knowledge, and claims that Arjuna himself points out to this. Since bondage is ignorance, work is irrelevant, while it is knowledge that destroys bondage and reveals what is eternal and beyond name and form. What performs

2. Although it is neither composite (like space) nor connected with anything else, it exists in some things such as the body.

the action is the body, not the real Self that is actionless and unchangeable. Not even inaction can be attributed to the Self, for it is beyond any such characteristics. One should renounce the world and do no action –literally– or expect no results from actions. But, since none can remain –at any instant– without doing any action, the wise ones see action in inaction and inaction in action, whereas inaction refers to the cessation of bodily and mental activities³.

Sankara attacks devotional religion as pointless. For him, wisdom and action are incompatible and the combination of *karma* and *jnana* cannot lead to any real liberation. Actions –mainly the sacrifices prescribed in the Vedas– were designed for the ignorant and the ones who are attached to the world. Only the suppression of the world of becoming –through *jnana* yoga– is the appropriate way, and only the enlightened one –the one who realized the irrelevance of actions– is capable of *samsara*, the release from the phenomenal world. This implies that total abandonment of action may be possible and –in fact– required for salvation. *Jnana* yoga can be practiced only by the *samnyasins*, while the karma yoga of action is designed for the ignorant ones, the ones who –by nature– cannot practice *jnana*.

The knowledge acquired by the active religious duties prescribed in the Vedas can provide one only with temporary pleasure. But the participation in Brahman, which does not depend on the performance of any deeds (karma) and, therefore, it does not require compliance with the Vedic laws, grants one with eternal bliss. The realization of *Brahman* does not depend on acts of religious duty, precisely because, according to Sankara, the *Brahman* is always already existent and accomplished. Since there is no ultimate difference between *Atman* and *Brahman*, the latter is not obtained, but is already known. The self of bliss is the real self and the soul's essential nature is eternal intelligence. There is no need for instruction because as long as one is determined to renunciate desire, to self-restraint, to tranquility, and to the desire of final release, one is already engaged in the enquiry of *Brahman*. The true knowledge of all existing things depends on the things themselves and not on the observation of any set of prerequisites. Since *Brahman's* existence is real and not simply the object of the senses, it is not possible for it to stand in an analogous relation to the dic-

3. For a very interesting discussion of inaction in action and action in inaction see the article by Herbert Fingarette, Action and Suffering in the Bhagavadgita, in *S-amkhya: A Dualist Tradition in Indian Philosophy*, Gerald Larson (ed.), Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987.

tates of the *bhakti* yoga of devotion either, for, when the knowledge of absolute unity has once occurred, there is nothing that is desired or resisted any longer.

To this, R. C. Zaehner (1969, p. 49) replies that *Brahman* is in fact the source that links this world with the eternal world. He also points to an inconsistency in Sankara's definition of God as the only true agent: In accordance to the law of *karma*, the agent is associated and 'bound' to what he does. How, then, can God be changeless –according to the absolute point of view– and also be an agent? How can he act in eternity where it is not supposed to exist such a thing as action? Zaehner remarks that the root of the logical inconsistency is Sankara's purely logical and philosophical formula of explanation itself, which is founded on an absolutistic system. Religion, for Zaehner, is paradoxical by nature, and Sankara's rationalism is too narrow and inadequate. Sankara's bias and preference for the *jnana* yoga, the contemplation of the Supreme, leads him to disregard the context of the Gita and usually to the reverse of the teaching. For example, Sankara refers to the unequivocal exaltation of the Impersonal *Brahman* as the ultimate reality. However, Sharma (1986, p. 75) asks: "But is there any such unequivocal passage in the text?" Sankara insists on the abandonment of all action, although the Gita teaches the abandonment only of the fruits of action. Yet, one would agree that "the perfecting of *Karmayoga* is only a step towards the attainment of full spiritual perfection" (Sharma, 1986, p. 87).

Sankara wrote a treatise, the *Upadesasahasri*, in the first part of which he teaches the oneness of *Atman* and *Brahman*, as well as the means of liberation and the achievement of *Brahman* by the wandering ascetic whose attributes are tranquility, self-control, and compassion. According to this, one's nature is *Atman*, pure consciousness, permanent and self-established. The *Atman*, the *Brahman* within, is free from family, cast, actions, purifying ceremonies, as well as the transmigratory existence. Only if one thinks that *Atman* is distinct from *Brahman* (which according to Sankara is false), one engages oneself in rituals. In order to achieve liberation, one has to abandon family, wealth, anything that distorts reality and creates the misconception that one's caste, stage of life etc. belong to one's *Atman*. Again, Sankara departs from the Gita that emphasizes the significance of the observation of one's duty ascribed by one's caste and other social norms.

In fact, the Gita is an embarrassment for *Advaita Vedanta*, for it delineates a theism, a devotion to a personal God, emphasizing the *karma* and *bhakti* (devotion) *yoga*.

Eliot Deutsch and Van Buitenen notice that Sankara tries to ‘tailor’ the text in order to fit to his tenets and his firm loyalty to *jnana yoga*. Further, according to Sharma, Sankara, by performing manoeuvres, misinterprets the Gita to make it fit to his school’s (*Advaita Vedanta*) tenets. Sharma detects an attempt to reconcile the doctrines of his school with the teachings of the Bhagavad-Gita: “... did he [Sankara] use the Gita, to some extent, as a building block for his system, along with the Upanishads and the Brahmasutra, or did he merely use it as a vehicle to propagate his preconceived ideas?” (Sharma, 1986, p. 42). One could infer that Sankara is mainly a commentator and does not have a finished, philosophically coherent system.

Unlike Sankara, *Ramanuja* employs a theistic interpretation of the Gita that is, however, in reconciliation with monism. According to him, the Gita affirms the *bhakti* doctrine of the Upanishads. Yet, since all scriptures are equally authoritative, and all conflicting statements are only apparently so and can be reconciled and integrated in one coherent system, he suggests a combination of *jnana*, *karma* and *bhakti*, practiced at the same time.

In the 11th century Ramanuja founded the school of *Vishishta-advaita Vedanta*, a theistic system (unlike the absolutistic one of *Advaita Vedanta*), in which God is the Supreme Soul and all creation forms his ‘body’. With his “qualified monism” Ramanuja stroke against the monism of *Advaita*, although not with a simple pietistic theism but a philosophically formulated one.

In his theistic system there are three distinct entities: matter, soul and God. Matter comprises the world of change including the senses, mind, ego, soul, while Spirit comprises the changeless eternal beings. Ramanuja makes no distinction between *Brahman* and God, who is personal and has consciousness, bliss, and existence as his qualities. *Brahman* is the atomic and infinite consciousness, the agent of action, the knower. Yet, *Brahman* is qualified, that is, determined by the *atmans* and the material world that consist its body. *Brahman* is the cause that becomes into an effect (the world), everything being his manifestation, forming a mode of God, and, therefore, even the matter of *prakrti* is an integral part of God. Physical and psychological acts are related to God, for he is the divine reality underlying everything. This explains the fact that, although the world and the individual souls are entities dependent on God, yet, they are eternal. This also implies that *Brahman* can never exist without the *atmans* and the material world. Even in its pure state it has body, not of *prakrti*, but of a pure transparent substance. Ramanuja also speaks of *maya*, but he

means the eternal, unconscious primal matter (*prakṛti*) which is in *Brahman* and which is transformed into the world. The world is not unreal but God's *lila*, "mere play," without reference to any purpose.

While God is the Supreme Person, the soul is the *Atman*, beginningless and endless. The individual *atmans* consist the plurality of 'spiritual monads' that attach themselves to psychosomatic organisms and are ultimately released. These ultimate selves are genuinely distinct among each other and from God, and this difference is absolutely real. God and *atman* may also form a unity which might be compared –but not identified– with that of the body with *atman*: the body is animated by *atman* and the *atman* needs the body to sustain it and provide the means for its liberation. The attachment of the *Atman* to the body is the effect of *karma*, which has essentially developed from the misconception about the indistinctness of the body and the *atman*. In the same way, *prakṛti* and *atman* constitute the body of God who animates them.

According to Ramanuja, the paths of knowledge, devotion, and action, are all mentioned in the Gita, although the text emphasizes that salvation is achieved through *bhakti* yoga, that is, devotion. *Bhakti* is one's participating in God, both intellectually and devotionally. One constantly reminds oneself of the dependence on and subservience to God. In the Gita, the Deity wants nothing from the soul but self-surrender, while God Krishna is similarly dependent on his devotees. There is no one-sided ontological dependence of the universe on God, but a mutual dependence. Arjuna realizes that, in order to obtain rightful knowledge one has to observe one's *dharma* with indifference. To encourage him for this, the god Krishna has to reveal to him the doctrine of *karma*.

Ramanuja thought that his task was to restore the unity of religion and philosophy, religion and thought. The wise one sees *jnana* in all performed works, *jnana* being a kind of action, while devotion (*bhakti*) is a condition of knowledge. If one devotes oneself exclusively to *jnana* yoga, the physical existence would not be possible, and, consequently, nor would *jnana* itself, because physical existence provides the means for it. It is necessary for one to sustain one's body: "From the point of view of the world as well as that of the *sastras* everything depends on the sacrifice: beings arise from food, food from rain, rain from sacrifice, sacrifice from the activity of an acting person, this activity from the body, the body depends on the individual *atman*; the composite body and *atman*, again, arise from food" (Van Buitenen, 1968, p. 70).

Karma yoga, referring to the right performance of rituals and good work, is superior because it implies knowledge of the *atman*⁴. It leads to *jnanayoga* through which one arrives at the contemplation and realization of *atman*. This, in its turn, leads to *bhakti* yoga, which is the only way of attaining God. The knowledge of the distinction between body and *atman* can only be acquired by the study of the scriptures and the worship of God in the right manner, the sacrifice, the controlling of senses, the practice of charity, pilgrimages, etc. This knowledge develops into a habit of thought on which a habit of action depends. Therefore, for Ramanuja, *karma* yoga has two aspects, knowledge and action. Both *karma* yoga and *jnana* yoga conclude in the contemplation of the *atman*. Gradually they interact more and more, and knowledge becomes more integrated in action, while action is spiritualized until *karma* yoga terminates in *jnana* yoga, and abstract knowledge becomes an immediate intuitive perception. Then, some recognitions occur: the similarity of *atmans* in all beings; the similarity of God and *atman*; the persistence of this recognition in everyday life; and, finally and more importantly, the cessation of making distinctions between one's own *atman* and the *atmans* of others. Yoga culminates in a mystic ecstasy of love and this is only the beginning of one's possibilities. That the progress to God follows the paths of *karma-jnana* and *bhakti* yoga, not successively but taken all at the same time, is, according to Van Buitenen, Ramanuja's fundamental teaching of the Gita.

Ramanuja felt the need to take into a serious account the common sense, the common experience and emotions, as well as the common religion. According to him, the Gita seeks to reconcile monism and theism, to stress the importance of ritual acts, and the importance of emotional religion. Since *Atman* and God are not identical but distinguishable, the union with God occurs in the spirit of love. God can be attained by the true knowledge of the Supreme *Atman* applied to the performances of the obligations designated by the *dharma* of the different stages of life, along with acts of worship, reverence, and devotion. The Gita stresses the necessity of action for the proper function of society and the world.

4. Arjuna does not know what the nature of the body is, that is, he does not know that it naturally dies, that the immortal *atman* is distinct from it, and that he can realize the *atman* by observing his *dharma*. He does not know that killing is nothing but the separation of the eternal *atman* from the perishable body.

It also points to the personal character of the Deity with whom the union can be attained though devotional *bhakti*.

According to Zaehner –who, as he claims along with Egerton (1972), is interested in what the Gita actually said– Ramanuja as well uses procrustean procedures, with his “odified non-dualism,” but he is closer to the spirit of the Gita than Sankara and his extreme non-dualism. He saw it as a unitary work whose whole purpose was to demonstrate the love for a personal God, not only the preparation for a spiritual liberation. This is why in his commentary on the Gita the personal god Krisna has the absolute supremacy over the phenomenal world as well as over the impersonal Absolute, *Brahman*.

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Glossary

*Advaita Vedanta: Philosophy emphasizing non-dualism; teaches that all is Brahman; what appears as other than Brahman is *maya*, or Brahman's appearance in forms not absolute in themselves.

*Atman: The soul or essence of one's self, said to be actually nothing other than Brahman.

*Bhakti: Spiritual path based on love for one's chosen deity.

*Brahman: The universal being; God understood to be not so much personal as source and essence of all existence.

*Dharma: The cosmic order, which works for righteousness, and to which the righteous adhere; one's own duty.

*Jnana-yoga: Attaining liberation through knowledge. Intended for spiritual aspirants who have a strong reflective bend. The key is discrimination, the power to distinguish between the surface self and the larger self that is out of sight.

*Karma: Cosmic and personal cause and effect by which one's thoughts and deeds determine what happens to one, whether good or bad, including one's future rebirths.

*Karma-yoga: Attaining liberation through selfless work in the world and following one's own dharma. Traditionally, it was interpreted in a highly conservative way to mean that one must accept the role given by caste.

*Maya: Brahman manifest in the world of forms; illusion when these forms are seen as other than Brahman.

*Moksha: Spiritual liberation.

*Qualified (or conditioned) reality: Reality as we ordinarily experience it, limited and constrained by space, time and the patterns of thought and feeling that shape our response to it.

*Samnyasin: The renunciant, a wandering monk free from all ties.

*Yoga: A spiritual path designed to unite one with God or one's true self.