

## Advaita Epistemology and Metaphysics - A Critical Analysis



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**ABSTRACT:** In India the philosophers, except the Madhyamika Buddhists and Jayarasi Bhatta, maintain that determination of an object depends on a *pramana*, a source of cognition. Similarly, *pramana* depends on *prameya padhartha*. In the present paper I will deal with the relationship between epistemology and metaphysics from the Advaita point of view.

According to Advaita Vedanta, Brahman is the only highest reality. It does never get contradicted. Brahman is *sat-cit-ananda* i.e. Eternal Existence, Eternal Consciousness and Eternal Bliss. The three aspects -*sot*, *cit* and *ananda*- constitute the essence of Brahman. Brahman is unknown and unknowable. All sources of cognitions [*pramana-s*] fail to cognize Brahman. It is *avanmanasagacara*. The nature of Brahman can be explained through the methods of *adhyaropa* and *apavoda*. Advaita Vedanta does not admit any relationship between *pramiti* and Brahman from the higher standpoint.

The teachers of Advaita Vedanta hold that the relationship between a *pramana* and a *prameya* is real from the lower standpoint. In Advaita epistemology *prama'nacaitanya* is called *vrcticaitanya*. According to Dharmaraja, *vrtri* means modification of mind in respect of the object of cognition [*prameya kara*]. In visual perception of the jar mind goes out of the body through the eye, reaches the jar and takes the form of the jar. Dharmaraja gives an example of visual perception only. But other teachers of Advaita Vedanta admit two types of *antahkaranavrtti* - *pratyaksavrtti* and *paroksavrtti*. In Advaita Vedanta epistemology, the four factors, namely *pramatr*, *prameya*, *pramana* and *pramiti*- are conditioned consciousness, which are real in the lower level of existence. All forms of worldly and Vedic behaviors that are connected with valid means of cognition and objects of cognition are illusory (*adhyasika*).

Notably, the teachers of Advaita Vedanta refuse to accept any relationship between *pramiti* and Brahman, but they admit the relationship, between *pramana* and Brahman. They deny *brahmajnana*, but they admit *brahmakara antahkaranavrtti*, which is secondarily called *brahmajnana*. After a careful analysis it comes to light that in Advaita scheme a knowable object (*prameya*) is related with both *pramana* and *prameya* from the lower standpoint whereas Brahman is exclusively related with *pramana* from higher standpoint.

**KEYWORDS:** Pramana, Prameya, Mulajnana, Sat-cit-ananda, Pramatrcaitanya, Visayacaitanya, Pramanacaitanya, Pramiticaitanya, Paramarthika, Vyavaharika, Prativhasika, Antahkaranavrtti, Svaprakasa.

In the Indian philosophical systems epistemology plays a vital role. Notably, the Madhyamika Buddhists and Jayarasi Bhatta deny the validity of cognitions and epistemological projects in general. All other philosophers in India are of the view that determination of an object depends on a *pramana*, a source of cognition. Similarly, a *pramana* also depends on a *prameya padartha*. So there is an invariable relationship between them. As a matter of fact a *pramana* leads a reader to the veridicality and the philosophical value as well. In the present paper I will deal with the relationship between epistemology and metaphysics from the Advaita point of view.

According to Advaita Vedanta, Brahman is the only highest reality. It remains ever uncontradicted. The world having names and forms is unreal or false i.e. *anirvacya*. It is the derivative of primordial *ne-science* (*mulajnana*). It has no reality of its own. Due to *mulajnana* one Brahman appears to be many. Brahman is *sat-cit-ananda* i.e. Eternal Existence, Eternal Consciousness and Eternal Bliss. *Sat*, *Cit* and *Ananda* are not the properties of Brahman, but Its essence. These are not the different natures of Brahman. These three aspects constitute the one essence of Brahman. Consciousness is nothing but Existence and Existence is nothing but Bliss. The Consciousness-aspect of Brahman and the Existence -aspect of Brahman are revealed to us, whereas Its Bliss-aspect remains obscured. Brahman is unknown and unknowable. All sources of cognitions {*pramana-s*} fail to cognize Brahman. The eye cannot see Brahman, the word cannot express It and mind cannot think of It. The Kenopanisad declares *na tatra caksir gacchati na*

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vag gacchati na manah<sup>1</sup>. Brahman is called avanmanasagocara. The Advaita Vedantins maintain that the nature of Brahman can be explained through the methods of adhyaropa and apavada.

The term apavada denotes negation i.e. 'this is not', 'this is not' (neti, neti). Brahman is neither body, nor senses, nor mind and so on. So the Advaita Vedantins proclaim that sat-cit-ananda is to be understood negatively. They interpret sat-cit-ananda as different from asat, different from acit and different from dukkha. We notice three characters namely asatta, jadatva and dukkha in the objects of the world. Brahman, according to Advaita Vedanta, is asadbhinna, acidbhinna and dukkhabhinna. So Brahman is called pratyagatman. If anybody says he knows Brahman, he actually does not know all-pervasive Brahman. He wrongfully knows Brahman either as body, or as senses or as mind or as any other limited object. On the contrary, he who thinks Brahman is not capable of being known by a means of right cognition (pramana), somehow knows Brahman. The seer of the Kenopanisad declares yasyamatam tasya matam matam yasya na veda sah.<sup>2</sup> Thus it comes to light that the Advaita Vedantins do not admit any relationship between pramiti or valid cognition and Brahman from the higher standpoint.

We may mention in this connection that the teachers belonging to the Sankara School of Advaita Vedanta are of the view that the relationship between a pramana and a prameya is real from the lower standpoint. The cognition of a thing depends on the four factors, namely, pramatrcaitanya, visyacaitanya, pramanacaitanya and pramiticaitanya. Pramatrcaitanya is the knowing agent, visyacaitanya is the object of cognition, pramanacaitanya is the source of cognition and pramiticaitanya is the resultant cognition. In Advaita epistemology pramanacaitanya is called vrtticaitanya. There are two types of vrtti- antahkaranavrtti and avidyavrtti. The former is the source of right cognition and the latter is the source of error. According to Advaita Vedanta, pramana or antahkaranavrtti means modification of mind in respect of the object of cognition. Mind is made of light. It has no form. But in the process of cognition it becomes modified. This is called antahkaranavrtti i.e. pramana. Dharmaraja in the Vedantaparibhasa" asserts that in visual perception of the jar mind goes out of the body through the eye, reaches the jar and takes the form of the jar. So ghatakara antahkaranavrtti i.e. modification of mind in respect of jar is here pramana.

Traditionally, the pramanas accepted by the Advaitins are held to be six: pratyaksa, anumana, upamana, sabda, arthapatti and anupalabdhii. But Dharmaraja gives an example of visual perception only. He does not deal with other pramana-s as vrtti. In Advaita epistemology, we see two types of antahkaranavrtti a pratyaksavrtti and paroksavrtti. The former may further be classified into two - caksusavrtti and acaksusavrtti. In the case of caksusavrtti vrtti means modification of mind in the form of object. But in the case of acaksusavrtti it means getting in touch with the object and in paroksavrtti it means a particular state of mind. In Advaita Vedanta, the four factors, namely pramatr, prameya, pramana and pramiti- are conditioned consciousness, which are real in the lower level of existence. The followers of Sankara admit three levels of existence- transcendental [paramarthika) existence, empirical [vyavaharika) existence and apparent {pratibhasika) existence. The last two levels of existence represent the lower standpoint. The illusory objects and dream-objects are apparently real, but in the higher level of existence they get cancelled by normal experience. The objects experienced in the waking state are empirically real, but they get cancelled in the transcendental level of existence.

Sankara in his commentary on the Brahmasutra mentions two types of padartha- atman or the subject and anatman or the object. Atman is Consciousness and anatman is inert object. The former is technically known as visayi and the latter as visaya. The former is expressed by the term asmat and the latter by the word yusmat. The former is self-luminous (svaprakasa) and the latter is cidbhasya i.e. revealed by Consciousness (paraprakasa). The former is the Real (satya) and the latter is the Unreal (anrta). So they are absolutely distinct. But under a spell of primordial ne-science {mulajnana) an ordinary man couples the Real and the Unreal and superimposes anatman on atman and vice versa, and says the body is my Self and sickness, death, children, wealth etc. belong to my Self (aham idam, mamedam). Sankara in his Adhyasabhasya observes atatantabibiktayo dharmadharmino mithyajnananimitta satyanrita mithunikritya "aham idam", "mama idam" iti naisargik ayam lokavyavara.<sup>3</sup> Thus Sankara and his followers maintain that all forms of worldly and Vedic behavior that are connected with valid means of cognition and objects of cognition, are illusory (adhyasika) Sankara says atmanatmanoh itaretaradhyasam puraskritya sarve pramanaprameyavyavaharah laukikah vaidikasca pravrttah<sup>4</sup>

The superimposition of the atman and anatman and vice versa is the presupposition on which all the practical distinctions between the means of cognition (pramana) and the object of cognition (prameya) depend. Sankara says avidyavadvisayani eva pratyaksadini pramani sastrani ca.<sup>5</sup> The means of (right cognition or pramana) cannot operate unless there be a pramatr knowing personality. Again, a man without self-identification with the body, mind, sense etc. cannot become a cognizer. Perception and other means of cognition cannot operate without the employment of the senses, and without the body i.e basis or adhithana the senses cannot operate. Nobody can act by means of cognition on which the nature of the Self is not superimposed. In the Brahmasutrabhasya Sankara says na hi indriyani anupaddya pratyaksadivyavaharah sambhavati. na ca adhithdnam antarena indriyanam vyavaharah sambhavati. na ca anadhyastabhdvena dehena kascid vyaptreya.<sup>6</sup>

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Interestingly, there is no difference of men from animals in regard to empirical behavior. When animals notice a man approaching them with a stick in his hand, they think that he wants to hurt them. So they run away. But animals approach a man carrying green grass in his hand. Similarly, men also run away when they see strong fierce-looking fellows coming near with swords. But they confidently approach men of opposite nature. So men and animals follow the same course of procedure with regard to the means and object of cognition. It is well known that the procedure of animals bases on non-discrimination of the Self and body. From the fact of similarity the Advaitins assert that men also proceed with regard to perception and so on, in the same way as the animals do. Sankara rightly observes *atah samanah paivadibhih purusanam pramanaprimeyavyavaharah*.<sup>7</sup> Thus we see that the teachers belonging to Sankara School of Advaita Vedanta maintain a relationship between *pramana* and *prameya* from the lower standpoint.

I would like to point out here that Advaita Vedanta does not deny the role of *pramana* in the higher level of existence. In empirical state an object is related to the mental mode i.e. *antahkaranavrtti* and resultant cognition i.e. *pramiticaitanya* which is also called *phalacaitanya*. The Advaitins admit two types of *visayavyapti*, namely *vrttivyapti* and *phalavyapti*. *Vrttivyapti* means the relation of object with *antahkaranavrtti* and *phalavyapti* means the relation of object with right cognition or *prama*. In the right cognition of a jar the *pramana* or *ghatakara antahkaranavrtti* removes the ignorance (*ajnana*) of the jar and *phalacaitanya* reveals the jar. The jar is an inert object. So it needs cognition for its revelation. It is true that the teachers of Advaita Vedanta refuse to accept any relationship between *pramiti* and Brahman, but they admit the relationship between *pramana* and Brahman. They deny *brahmajnana*, but they admit *brahmakara antahkaranavrtti*. The Upanisadic *mahdvakya*-s like *tattvamasi* through the methods of *sravana*, *manana* and *nididhyasana* produce *braamakara antahkaranavrtti* which is secondarily called *brahmajnana*. According to Advaita Vedanta, the mental mode (*vrtti*) is primarily known as *pramana*. But it is secondarily called *pramiti*. So Brahman becomes the object of *pramana*, not of *pramiti*. As Brahman is self-luminous (*svaprakasa*). It does not depend on *phalacaitanya* for its revelation. After a careful analysis it comes to light that in Advaita scheme from the lower standpoint a knowable object (*prameya*) is related with both *pramana* and *prameya*, whereas from higher standpoint Brahman is exclusively related with *pramana*.

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